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Labor, the Conservative Coalition, and the Welfare State

Following the unprecedented growth of union membership and political activism during the war years, the leaders of the labor movement expected to use their newfound power to help liberal forces build a comprehensive welfare state. Labor supported policies to ensure full employment and high wages as well as generous national government programs for retirement, disability, unemployment, and health care. But the same political forces that united in a backlash against organized labor and New Deal labor policies in the late thirties and forties were largely opposed to this agenda. During the first decades of the postwar period, the influence of the conservative coalition of Southern Democrats and Republicans extended beyond labor issues to many of the public policies that labor endorsed. At a pivotal moment in history when welfare states were expanding across the Western world with recovery from the war, when ideas for reform proliferated, and when labor represented a third of the workforce and appeared to still be growing, labor's ambitious policy goals collided with an inhospitable postwar political reality.

The conservative coalition dominated congressional policy making from the 1940s through the early 1960s and remained influential into the 1970s. During

this period, the coalition exerted power in both Democrat- and Republican-controlled Congresses, challenging the agenda of Democratic presidents Harry S. Truman and John F. Kennedy. Labor accused the conservative coalition of working with Republican president Dwight Eisenhower to pass “veto-proof” legislation, but even some of Eisenhower’s proposals were rebuffed. As a UAW staff member noted, “Whichever Party is nominally in power, the Southern Democrats manage to get along fairly well in serving the immediate interests of the economically and politically powerful minorities in their Districts and States.”¹ At times the conservative coalition controlled legislative outcomes because of its unambiguous numerical superiority in the House, the Senate, or both as it did during the passage of the Taft-Hartley Act. At other times, under larger Democratic majorities, liberals’ impact on legislative outcomes was undercut by the conservative coalition’s use of various institutions in the legislative process. While the conservative coalition initiated the legislation to restrain organized labor discussed in the previous chapter, it played its most prominent role in shaping public policy by watering down, stalling, and obstructing liberal proposals, particularly when the Democrats controlled the presidency.

This chapter explores the efforts of labor-liberals to build on New Deal welfare state programs and to restore New Deal labor law at the height of the conservative coalition’s power in the 1940s and 1950s. It looks at efforts in four policy areas: to establish Keynesian-style coordinated economic planning for full employment in the Employment Act of 1946; to improve and standardize workers’ income security programs in fights over the minimum wage, unemployment compensation, and disability insurance; to provide universal access to health care in a single-payer, government-funded national health insurance program; and to repeal Taft-Hartley and fight further Taft-Hartley amendments in the union anticorruption bill known as Landrum-Griffin. This period produced a pattern of incremental growth in economic planning and income security programs, within boundaries acceptable to the conservative coalition. But liberal and conservative forces were largely drawn to a stalemate on national health care and restoring New Deal labor law because compromises could not be reached that could attract support from some members of the conservative coalition while retaining support from labor-liberals. The more steadfast labor and other advocates of reform were in their preferred policy approach, the less likely there was to be action. The comprehensive, universal, and national policies and programs that dominated labor’s postwar agenda were seemingly impossible.

The Postwar Agenda to Expand the Welfare State

One of the most significant changes for organized labor during the New Deal was its growing support for welfare state programs, government management of the economy, and government intervention in industrial relations and working conditions. Previously, the AFL emphasized what its long-serving president Samuel Gompers termed “pure and simple unionism,” or business unionism, which focused on collective bargaining over political action and social reform. Labor had been very suspicious of government because its actions had so often been hostile, from courts issuing injunctions against strikes and other collective union activity to the president ordering troops to disband strikes. From the late 1800s through the early years of the New Deal, the courts also routinely invalidated legislation pushed by unions to improve working conditions, such as minimum wage laws. A number of scholars argue that court doctrines discouraged labor from wasting resources on seemingly futile political activity.² But the severity of the Great Depression led many labor leaders to call for government policies to address the economic crisis. This interest in government action was reinforced by Roosevelt’s overtures to labor as well as growing court deference to the elected branches on social and economic legislation as signaled in the famous 1937 Supreme Court case *National Labor Relations Board vs. Jones & Laughlin Steel Co.*, which ruled the NLRA constitutional. Initially the CIO was more committed than the AFL to improving the quality of life for workers through legislation and government programs because CIO unions did not have the resources of more established unions to provide their members with benefits for health care, unemployment, or retirement and the unskilled workers targeted by the CIO were in a weaker position to demand these benefits from their employers.³ But gradually the positions of the two federations converged.

While the foundation of the modern welfare state was laid during the New Deal, the agenda for its expansion was developed during World War II and the reconversion period. Almost all the welfare state initiatives of the Roosevelt years were passed by 1938, including the Social Security old-age assistance and insurance programs, a joint federal-state program of assistance to the poor, a joint federal-state program of unemployment compensation, and the FLSA. As discussed in the previous chapter, the FLSA reflected the death knell of the New Deal as the pro-welfare state coalition shrank in Congress and Roosevelt’s focus shifted to the crisis in Europe. But during the war, the administration continued

to develop a domestic agenda that was outlined in FDR's 1944 State of the Union address, in which he called for an "Economic Bill of Rights." These rights included a job, food, clothing, recreation, housing, education, medical care, and economic security in old age, sickness, disability, and unemployment. Roosevelt concluded his address by noting, "All these rights spell security. And after this war is won, we must move forward in the implementation of these rights to new goals of human happiness and well being."⁴ The CIO made Roosevelt's Bill of Rights the preamble to its proposals for the 1948 party conventions, and the AFL proposals reflected the same priorities.⁵ Roosevelt did not live to see these plans through, but Truman picked up his agenda.

Shortly after the conclusion of the war, Truman sent a special message to Congress containing a twenty-one-point legislative program based on Roosevelt's postwar agenda.⁶ In what would become Truman's "Fair Deal," he called for expanded unemployment compensation, a higher minimum wage, housing legislation, public works projects, full-employment planning, and a permanent Fair Employment Practices Committee to fight racial discrimination, among other proposals to deal with reconversion and defense. Two months later, Truman called for congressional action on a five-point health program including national health insurance. Had these proposals become law in the postwar period, social welfare policies in the United States would have become quite comparable to those in other Western countries with influential labor and social democratic parties. But Truman and organized labor pushed this agenda at the height of the conservative coalition's power in Congress, during the 1940s and 1950s.

The Heyday of the Conservative Coalition

Divisions over labor issues led to the emergence of the conservative coalition, but the issues associated with World War II and reconversion made the coalition a consistent force in Congress that would play an influential policy-making role into the 1970s.⁷ As table 2.1 indicates, the conservative coalition began to appear more frequently on roll call votes in the 1940s in both the House and the Senate, and it began to prevail in a higher percentage of those votes. This pattern remained fairly consistent through the 1950s. Although the conservative coalition continued to appear on a sizable percentage of roll call votes, its success rate started to fall in the early sixties, reaching a low point

Table 2.1. Appearance and Success of Conservative Coalition

Period	House		Senate	
	Average Annual Appearances as Percentage of Nonunanimous Votes	Success Rate When It Appeared (%)	Average Annual Appearances as Percentage of Nonunanimous Votes	Success Rate When It Appeared (%)
1933–39	4	62	6	67
1940–49	23	91	15	86
1950–59	20	88	19	92
1960–64	20	58	24	54
1965–66	31	28	32	46
1967–69	36	68	31	68
1970–74	35	72	35	64
1975–79	37	60	31	59

Source: Based on calculations from data on conservative coalition roll calls in Shelley, *Permanent Majority*, 24–25, 30–31. A conservative coalition vote is one in which half or more of Southern Democrats and Republicans vote on one side of an issue and half or more of non-Southern Democrats vote on the other side.

during the height of the Great Society in the 89th Congress, only to rebound in the late sixties.

Partisan patterns diverged among the Southern and non-Southern wings of the Democratic Party over time. Many of the non-Southern Democrats who frequently voted with Republicans in the 1930s were gradually replaced in Congress by Republicans. Thus Julius Turner finds that the Democratic contingent of the conservative coalition became increasingly Southern from 1937 to 1944.⁸ The prominence of Southern Democrats in the conservative coalition was due to one-party dominance in the South. The conservative districts and states that produced the most faithful Southern members of the conservative coalition would have likely elected Republicans had those districts and states been in areas with a competitive two-party system. As conservative Democrats from regions outside the South were pushed out of Congress, non-Southern Democrats became more unified on conservative coalition roll call votes, as indicated in table 2.2.⁹ Most non-Southern Democrats were increasingly tied to the labor-liberal constituencies of the party, which fostered greater cohesion on conservative coalition votes, peaking at the height of the Great Society. But while Southerners, even liberal Southerners, voted as a solid block in opposition to civil rights policies and were fairly unified in their opposition to pro-

Table 2.2. Cohesion on Conservative Coalition Votes of Southern versus Non-Southern Democrats

Period	House		Senate	
	Average Annual Cohesion of Southern Democrats	Average Annual Cohesion of Non-Southern Democrats	Average Annual Cohesion of Southern Democrats	Average Annual Cohesion of Non-Southern Democrats
1933–39	76	69	63	62
1940–49	77	76	72	72
1950–59	75	84	71	73
1960–64	69	87	76	79
1965–66	69	88	73	82
1967–69	77	83	76	74
1970–74	74	77	77	79
1975–79	69	75	75	76

Source: Based on calculations from data on conservative coalition roll calls provided by Shelley, *Permanent Majority*. Cohesion is the average percentage of representatives in each category who voted together on conservative coalition votes.

labor policies, they were more divided on most other policies favored by liberal Democrats. The cohesion among Southern Democrats was typically lower than among non-Southern Democrats, particularly among House members, after 1950. Many Southern Democrats were torn between party loyalty and constituency pressures, which varied between Southerners and non-Southerners. While middle-class voters turned out at roughly equal rates across the country, working-class voters turned out at considerably lower rates in the South, producing more conservative districts.¹⁰ As a result, the Southerners were often a “swing” group that determined whether a policy would succeed or fail based on the percentage that decided to side with the rest of the party.¹¹

Analyses of congressional roll call votes to determine which areas of public policy were subject to the conservative coalition’s influence have produced varied findings depending on the time period examined and the breakdown of issue areas. V. O. Key found that the conservative coalition did not appear on most policies in the selected Congresses he examined from 1933 to 1945.¹² In contrast, looking at selected congressional sessions from 1921 through 1964, Turner found the conservative coalition to be active on a range of issues including labor, immigration, internal security, housing, monetary and fiscal policy, and states’ rights.¹³ Looking at all congressional sessions from 1933 to 1980,

Mark C. Shelley also found the conservative coalition active on a number of categories of issues from international involvement to social welfare, with the greatest impact on government management of the economy, regulation of labor unions, federal budgets, and federalism.¹⁴ Looking at 150 roll call votes from 1933 to 1950 and using a more refined division of issue categories, Katznelson, Kim Geiger, and Daniel Kryder found the conservative coalition to be influential only in the area of labor policy, with the two wings of the Democratic Party surprisingly cooperative on welfare state, fiscal, regulatory, and planning issues during this period.¹⁵ A major limitation of roll call analysis, acknowledged by most of these scholars, is that it misses the substantial influence of the conservative coalition exerted in other stages of the legislative process. The case studies in this chapter suggest that roll call analysis significantly underestimates the coalition's influence on labor's agenda.

In addition to the Rules Committee discussed in the previous chapter, the conservative coalition benefited from several institutions in the legislative process that often hurt labor's interests. The heyday of the power of the conservative coalition and that of congressional committees overlapped in the "era of committee government," in which the committees did most of the work of legislating. Which committee a bill was referred to and the ideology of its membership as well as its chair could determine whether the bill was reported out and in what form. Some committees defended labor, while others were very hostile. Further hurting labor's position, seniority governed the selection of committee chairs during this period, a system that evolved in part to suppress factional conflicts in the parties.¹⁶ Southern Democrats faced less electoral competition in the one-party region until the 1970s and thus served more terms and built up greater seniority. As a result, the seniority system often gave some of labor's most ardent foes a privileged position in the legislative process. As a New York City labor leader declared in calling for congressional reform in the mid-sixties, these Southern chairs were "elected by a handful of lilywhite Southern votes." Yet each could "bottle up legislation—even legislation proposed by a President—and keep it from coming to a vote of the Congress."¹⁷ Even when legislation opposed by the conservative coalition managed to make it to the floor, the coalition often prevailed because its experienced leaders had a better understanding of how to manipulate parliamentary procedures to their advantage. As Speaker Sam Rayburn (TX) noted to freshman congressman and future AFL-CIO lobbyist Andy Biemiller when he arrived in Washington in 1944, "We have virtually nobody from the North or West that knows the rules. Only the

southerners know the rules, and I'm having troubles."¹⁸ Conference committees, required to resolve differences in legislation between the House and the Senate, were another veto point in the legislative process whereby a victory in one chamber could be undermined by the intransigence of the other chamber's conferees. The conservative coalition was so successful in these realms in the House that its members in the Senate rarely needed to resort to filibusters before the mid-1960s.¹⁹

In order to give a more comprehensive picture of the impact of both legislative institutions and the conservative coalition on labor's policy agenda, the remainder of this chapter traces major policies from the time they were proposed through each stage of the legislative process. The conservative coalition did not always exert its influence through the institutions discussed above. Sometimes it controlled floor majorities and shaped bills such as the minimum wage through the regular amendment process on the floor. In contrast, legislation like health care never got a roll call vote because it died in committee. But in other cases, such as the full-employment bill, the committee the bill was referred to in the House, the Rules Committee, and the conference committee all worked to undermine labor's goals even though the bill reflected overwhelming support from all quarters on final passage. Sometimes welfare state measures failed and sometimes they passed. But the fingerprints of the conservative coalition were always left on the policies that made it into law. Careful analysis shows that the conservative coalition successfully fought a range of policies that might increase the power of the executive branch relative to Congress, increase the power of the federal government over the states or the local labor force, or increase the power of organized labor. All these factors were reflected in the full-employment bill, which was one of the first major domestic proposals taken up by Congress in the postwar period.

The Full-Employment Struggle

Interest in government planning to avert unemployment rose with the end of the war, the cancellation of defense contracts, and the return of soldiers to the civilian workforce in 1945. The first proposal for full employment through Keynesian-style national investments was produced by the National Farmers' Union with the assistance of Alvin Hansen, the premier American economist associated with Keynes's theories and a former economist for the National Resources Planning Board (NRPB). The NRPB developed plans for an "American

Beveridge Plan” in the Roosevelt administration comparable to Great Britain’s postwar blueprint for an expanded welfare state.²⁰ In January 1945, Senate War Contracts Subcommittee chairman Senator James Murray (D-MT) introduced a more comprehensive full-employment proposal cosponsored by a bipartisan coalition of liberals. The bill’s opening statement echoed Roosevelt’s language in the Economic Bill of Rights: “All Americans able to work and seeking work have the *right* to a useful and remunerative job in the industries, or shops, or offices, or farms, or mines of the nation.”²¹ To ensure this right, the president would develop a “National Production and Employment Budget” to achieve full employment by adjusting government spending and programs in accordance with economic forecasts. Building on the corporatist model of economic mobilization for the two world wars, the executive branch would consult major stakeholders such as business, agriculture, and labor in the planning process. Anticipating the concerns of conservatives who feared the growth of the executive branch at the expense of Congress, the bill provided for a Joint Committee on the Budget in Congress to study and report on the president’s proposals.

Organized labor emerged as the major supporter of full-employment legislation. Initially the support was qualified and lukewarm. In contrast to the AFL’s old business unionism approach, leaders of the AFL now expressed the belief that the government bore a responsibility to ensure full employment, while the left wing of the CIO favored planning by industry councils composed of representatives of labor and management. However, the AFL was suspicious that the full-employment legislation was the brainchild of its rival the CIO and thus had some reservations.²² Some labor leaders also questioned whether an effective full-employment policy could pass Congress and feared the legislation might crowd out more pressing and feasible proposals such as a national system of unemployment insurance.²³ Labor support for the bill grew as it appeared more politically viable, as rank-and-file support for full employment became apparent, and as the employment picture turned bleaker with the end of the war. Moreover, the rivalry between the federations encouraged both to support the full-employment bill out of fear that the other would gain prestige by pushing it. Representatives of the CIO and the AFL, as well as the independent UMW and the various railway unions, testified in favor of the bill and worked for passage. In the first major legislative battle in which the AFL and CIO coordinated their activities, both labor federations joined the Continuations Group, a coalition of dozens of organizations operating to pass the legislation that included the National Farmers’ Union, the NAACP, and the American Veterans Committee.

Murray's proposal moved fairly easily through the Senate. The bill was referred to a hospitable committee, the Banking and Currency Committee, chaired by Senator Wagner, the author of the NLRA, and reported favorably with few substantive changes. On the Senate floor a series of amendments softened the language of the bill and reduced the rhetorical commitment of the federal government to do everything in its power to ensure full employment. But the technical and administrative provisions of the bill were barely touched.²⁴ It was approved on the Senate floor by the large margin of 71–10 in September 1945, three weeks after Truman submitted his twenty-one-point program.

The interest group opposition to full-employment legislation was caught off guard by Senate action and moved quickly to undermine the bill in the House. Major opponents were the National Association of Manufacturers; local Chambers of Commerce (although the national president supported the bill and essentially recused himself from lobbying on it); the American Farm Bureau, which represented large farmers; and the conservative ideological organization the Committee for Constitutional Government. The opposition argued that the bill made unrealistic promises, reflected unsound economic theories, restricted free enterprise, encouraged totalitarianism, and was thus un-American.

The opposition also tried to associate full-employment legislation with what it depicted as the growing and dangerous power of organized labor. A bulletin by the Ohio Chamber of Commerce distributed to its members and placed in the congressional record of the hearings in the House reflects this sentiment. It noted that the CIO-PAC was creating "fake" "unemployment crisis propaganda" and asserted:

The Communist-sparked C.I.O.-P.A.C. aided by its political fellow travelers, is now making the drive which has been in preparation for years. Everything that has happened up to now has been but a preliminary.

This is the hour, almost the moment, of historic decision. The basic goal of C.I.O.-P.A.C. is to overturn our system of competitive, private enterprise and substitute for it complete government control over capital and labor alike. . . .

Keystone of the new group of "crisis" legislative enactments, devised by the same cunning brains that have guided this boasted bloodless revolution, is the full employment bill, now being seriously considered in Washington.

Labeled in fraud and deception as a bill designed to preserve private enterprise, if enacted, it would be the scaffold on which private enterprise could be dropped to its death.

The alarmist bulletin concluded, "If the C.I.O.-P.A.C. Federal legislative program succeeds, the Government moves in as the new management of your company."²⁵ This attack was especially effective in building support among small and medium-size companies that were least likely to be organized and perhaps feared unions most of all. The opposition of the Farm Bureau was rooted in the fear that full employment would make it impossible to recruit cheap farm labor, especially if the government was willing to fund decent-paying public works projects to keep employment high.

The bill faced more challenges in the House than in the Senate. The first obstacle emerged in committee. Instead of being referred to the House Banking and Currency Committee or the House Labor Committee, the full-employment bill was referred to the House Committee on Expenditures in the Executive Departments, which had jurisdiction over the Budget Bureau. As a UAW staffer would later note, "The history of the bill and its final form would have been substantially better if it had been handled by the more liberal Banking and Currency Committee."²⁶ The Committee on Expenditures was weighted with conservatives, and its chairman, Carter Manasco of Alabama, was very conservative and antilabor. The CIO's evaluation of Manasco's voting record in 1946 found that on twelve issues of interest to the CIO Manasco voted in favor of the CIO's position only once.²⁷ The Truman administration realized that the full-employment bill faced trouble in committee and tried to secure the support of Southern Democrats Manasco, William Whittington of Mississippi, and Joseph Mansfield of Texas. While Mansfield appeared open to an appeal to party loyalty, Manasco and Whittington demanded considerable concessions from the administration. The two finally promised they would report some form of a full-employment bill out of committee but it would not be the Senate bill or the House bill as introduced and might not even include the phrase "full employment."²⁸ The Truman administration conceded, realizing this might be the only way to move the bill to the House floor. Once a bill made it through the House, the administration would have another shot at pushing a stronger bill in conference committee. As Manasco presided over committee hearings in October, Truman went on the air and publicly reprimanded the committee for delaying the bill, and he put pressure on the House leadership to pass it by Thanksgiving. At the completion of the hearings in early November, the full committee rejected the House bill as introduced and appointed a subcommittee—consisting of Manasco, Whittington, conservative Republican Clare Hoffman, liberal Re-

publican George Bender, and liberal Democrat John Cochran—to write a substitute version.

The subcommittee transformed the bill. The language recognizing the *right* to employment and the obligation of the government to ensure full employment by commanding all necessary federal resources was eliminated. Instead, the new bill recognized that the government should aim for a “high” level of employment, production, and purchasing power and avoid economic fluctuations through spending on public works and loans. But it also mandated that the government avoid competition with private enterprise. To minimize the role of the executive branch, the president’s National Production and Employment Budget was eliminated and its purposes scaled back. Instead, a report on general economic activity was to be prepared by a three-member Council of Economic Advisors (CEA) subject to Senate confirmation. The emasculation of the bill’s provisions under the conservative committee chairman became known as the “Manasco-lation” of full-employment legislation.²⁹ Although a number of more liberal committee members were disappointed by the attenuated bill, only four diehard conservatives voted against it, and the substitute was reported favorably.

The full House took up the measure, now named the Employment Act of 1946 rather than the *Full* Employment Act, in mid-December. The Rules Committee shaped the final outcome by granting Manasco’s request to put two of the members most hostile to a strong full-employment bill in control of floor debate and to bar a roll call vote on the Senate bill or the House bill as originally introduced. Liberals would have to vote for the gutted bill or have no bill at all. The Truman administration supported the substitute again, hoping to strengthen it in conference. Ultimately it passed 255–126 and headed to conference with the Senate. It had the support of 90% of Democrats and 36% of Republicans. The real strength of the conservative coalition is not apparent in this roll call because its members scaled the bill back to something they could accept before it ever reached the floor.

The conference committee was roughly split between liberals and conservatives, with the Senate delegation biased in favor of a stronger bill and the House delegation (the same members of the House subcommittee who formulated the House substitute bill) biased in favor of a weak bill. Because the conservative members, particularly Manasco and Hoffman, preferred no bill to a strong bill, the liberals, who were eager to see a bill passed, bore the burden of compromise.

Thus the final product resembled the weaker House bill more than the stronger Senate bill. The original proposal's declarations of a right to a job and the federal government's obligation and ability to ensure that one was available were considerably scaled back. In votes that again did not reveal the power of the conservative coalition in shaping the outcome, the bill passed the House 320–84 and the Senate without opposition. It was signed by Truman in February 1946.

The failure to pass a strong full-employment bill and the watered-down version that finally did pass suggested that the national government would never develop the capacity to plan and implement full-employment policy. Instead, taxing and spending policies would be coordinated haphazardly, and oftentimes ineffectively, through periodic negotiation between the president and Congress. Improvements in workers' income security programs were handled in much the same way.

Incrementalism in Workers' Income Security Programs

In his twenty-one-point program, Truman proposed building on the protections for workers' incomes established during the New Deal. He called for creating federal standards for the joint federal-state unemployment compensation system, improving the minimum wage, and expanding the Social Security program to cover disability. These were three of the highest priorities for the labor movement. Over the course of the Truman and Eisenhower administrations, there were incremental improvements in each of these programs. As had been true even at the height of the New Deal, the key to successful compromises was state discretion in the administration of programs or limitations on the categories of workers covered or a combination of both. These compromises attracted enough members of the conservative coalition to pass, but in doing so, they often fell short of labor's goals.

Improving the Unemployment Compensation System

Organized labor has consistently advocated a strong federal role in and federal standards for the unemployment compensation system, whereas conservatives have supported maximum control by the states. Established as part of the 1935 Social Security Act, the unemployment insurance program is based on a payroll tax collected by the federal government and distributed to the states to run their own programs. States have wide discretion in determining which em-

ployees are covered and the duration and amount of benefits. Southern and poorer states tend to have less generous systems than those in the Northeast and industrial West, where labor is strongest. In the mid-1940s, liberals saw nationalization of the unemployment system as central to a comprehensive welfare state that would provide security to all workers regardless of their region or occupation. Reflecting this goal, three congressmen—NLRA author Senator Wagner, full-employment-bill sponsor Senator Murray, and Representative John Dingell (D-MI)—introduced a legislative package that included a national unemployment system, a disability insurance program, and national health care, which went nowhere in Congress. In 1945, Truman called for emergency action to expand the unemployment program's coverage and to improve benefits in anticipation of high unemployment during the reconversion period. But the conservative coalition on the House Ways and Means Committee killed a weakened bill extending the duration of benefits passed by the Senate.³⁰ The only action Congress took on the issue during the Truman administration actually made it harder for the federal government to enforce the limited federal standards in place.³¹

Although Congress continued to reject federal standards, additional workers were covered under the unemployment program during the Eisenhower administration, and a pattern developed of repeated short-term extensions in benefits to deal with cyclical surges in unemployment. In 1954, in the first major change to the program since it was created twenty years earlier, Congress rejected Eisenhower's call to modernize the program through a significant expansion in coverage but incorporated federal government employees and more small businesses.³² In 1958, in the midst of a recession, the AFL-CIO and Senator John F. Kennedy (D-MA) made a major push for federal standards to extend the duration of benefits and coverage.³³ As a result of the conservative coalition's actions on the floor of both the House and the Senate, the final bill authorized federal loans to states that *chose* to extend the duration of benefit payments, thus preserving the states' autonomy in administering the program. Echoing the criticisms of the Employment Act of 1946, Senator Kennedy observed, "As a solution to the economic problems caused by widespread unemployment [the bill] is completely ineffective. It offers the illusion of assistance . . . without the substance of effective help."³⁴ The following year, Kennedy again led an effort to create federal standards for the system, and the AFL-CIO held a high-profile conference in Washington to call attention to the plight of the unemployed, but congressional action was limited to a three-

month extension of the temporary provisions of the 1958 legislation. This pattern of emergency extensions and limited expansions of coverage continued into the twenty-first century as the unemployment compensation system became too outdated in most states to protect a changing workforce.

Expanding the Fair Labor Standards Act

While Southerners could fend off uniform national standards in the unemployment compensation system, they had already lost the battle for regional wage differentials in the passage of the original FLSA. So they concentrated on keeping the minimum wage low and restricting the number of workers covered by it. Minimum wage legislation ultimately became law during the Truman administration with overwhelming support. But the scope of the final bill was considerably scaled back from what the president, liberals, and organized labor advocated, and it took four years to pass. Truman's first effort was killed by the House Rules Committee, and the second effort succeeded only under threat of a discharge petition.³⁵ The bill finally passed 361–35, following a series of procedural maneuvers that amended the bill to *reduce*—rather than expand—minimum wage coverage from what it was in the existing law but kept the administration's proposed wage increase intact. Under pressure from Senate conferees, the final bill scaled back the number of workers who would lose coverage. A reduction in coverage was the price supporters had to pay to get a substantial increase in the minimum wage. Labor leaders praised the limited accomplishments in the bill but vowed to return to fight another day.³⁶ As with the Employment Act of 1946, the final bill received overwhelming support in the roll call, but only after the conservative coalition had shaped the bill in committee, on Rules, and in conference.

Similar struggles over the minimum wage occurred in the Eisenhower administration. In the pattern of incremental expansion that became the norm for minimum wage legislation, the wage was increased again, but despite Eisenhower's support, coverage was not expanded. By 1959, still only one-third of the labor force was covered by the FLSA.³⁷ Senator Kennedy, who had become a leading advocate of labor's causes, introduced a minimum wage bill based on the AFL-CIO's recommendations in 1960, but it died in conference committee. The chairman of the Rules Committee refused to send the bill to conference until he was assured that the conferees would insist on the watered-down House version. Senate conferees—under pressure from the AFL-CIO—refused to sacri-

fice extended coverage.³⁸ This time labor and its congressional allies figured they would have a better shot at a good bill after the 1960 elections.

Social Security Disability

The one policy area in which labor was relatively, if belatedly, satisfied was Social Security, which gradually grew into a comprehensive social insurance program protecting almost all workers from poverty in old age and disability. Both the Truman administration and organized labor tried but failed to expand Social Security coverage and benefits in the 1940s. However, during the 1950s, the Social Security program grew with every Congress, embodying the incrementalism that has been so characteristic of policy development in the United States. Support for the popular old-age program became more bipartisan and widespread among business, the states, and the insurance industry.³⁹ Amendments to the Social Security Act in 1950 produced the most significant expansion of coverage in the program's history, and benefits were substantially increased.⁴⁰ Benefits were increased again in 1952, and coverage was made almost universal in 1954.⁴¹

Expanding coverage to disability proved more daunting. While organized labor was the most powerful advocate of expanding the program, the American Medical Association (AMA) was the most powerful opponent.⁴² Doctors feared that government involvement in the determination of disability was a slippery slope toward government intervention in the field of medicine. Despite the AMA's influence, the House included a disability provision in its version of the 1950 amendments. Indicating the influence of institutions, the measure likely survived because the Rules Committee, under pressure from the Speaker of the House, reported the bill under a closed rule, which prohibited amendments on the House floor. The Speaker was able to use the threat of the recently adopted twenty-one-day rule (discussed in Chapter 4), which allowed the House to bypass a committee if it bottled up the bill for twenty-one days.⁴³ But the disability provision was dropped at the insistence of Senate members of the conference committee.⁴⁴ However, as a compromise the bill established federal grants to the states to provide assistance to the needy disabled, which was agreeable to Southerners because it preserved state control over the distribution of benefits. This proved to be an opening wedge. The 1954 amendments preserved old-age insurance rights for covered workers who became permanently disabled, reflecting one of the first defeats for the AMA.⁴⁵ The conservative coalition was

once again divided because the bill left the determination of disability up to the states. In 1956, the newly merged AFL-CIO made disability coverage its top priority because lobbyists were convinced it was politically feasible.⁴⁶ A compromise that covered workers over age fifty and left the determination of eligibility to the states passed the House.⁴⁷ The Senate Finance Committee refused to accept the measure, but AFL-CIO president George Meany convinced the chairman, Walter George (D-GA), a stalwart of the conservative coalition, to sponsor an amendment on the floor to add the disability provision.⁴⁸ Historian Edward Berkowitz suggests that George was open to Meany's appeal because local craft workers stood by him when he was targeted by Roosevelt's 1938 purge. Majority Leader Lyndon Johnson (TX) closely coordinated the floor vote with Nelson Cruikshank, then the director of the AFL-CIO Social Security Department, giving him an hour to round up 6 necessary votes.⁴⁹ The bill narrowly passed (47–45) over the Eisenhower administration's opposition because the conservative coalition was once again split. While only 14% of Republicans voted for the amendment, 76% of Southern Democrats did.⁵⁰ All but one non-Southern Democrat voted for it. It was not the fully federal, universal disability program that Roosevelt, Truman, and labor once favored but rather, as Berkowitz observes, "an amalgam of New Deal aspirations and postwar realities."⁵¹ Four years later, disability coverage was extended to workers under age fifty without much debate, finally filling a major hole in the social safety net long targeted by organized labor. The successes in the incremental expansion of Social Security contrasted with the deadlock on national health insurance during the same time period.

The Push for National Health Insurance

Perhaps no policy better illustrates the disconnect between the policy goals of organized labor and the political reality it confronted in the postwar period than the pursuit of health care reform in the late 1940s. Conservatives were fundamentally opposed to a universal government-financed health care system, whereas labor-liberals were unwilling at this point to accept a system based on private insurance. In the first battle over universal health care, one of many that would take place over the next sixty years, legislative institutions like the Rules Committee did not kill any particular bill. Instead, the advocates of a national health insurance system did not have enough votes in committee—and in all likelihood on the floor—for their plan, and no other compromise

could attract a viable legislative coalition. Not enough players, including organized labor, were willing to make concessions, and legislation failed to clear the first hurdle in the legislative process because of the unity of the conservative coalition's opposition.

The First Legislative Battles

Organized labor has been one of the most influential and enduring advocates of universal health care. Although the AFL initially opposed government-sponsored health insurance as part of Gompers's "pure and simple unionism," it later changed its position. In 1938, AFL president William Green announced the federation would work in the states to amend existing accident compensation programs to include health insurance. In the 1940s, as with unemployment compensation, organized labor endorsed the nationalization of social insurance programs to avoid regional and state variation. The AFL was joined by the CIO in its call for a national health insurance program. Both Green and representatives of the CIO participated in the development of the national health insurance provisions of a series of Wagner-Murray-Dingell bills. Supporters of the first version, referred to House and Senate committees controlled by the conservative coalition, knew it had no realistic chance of passage in the 78th Congress (1943–44) but hoped to use it to build momentum for a postwar domestic program.⁵²

In an effort to win the loyalty of labor-liberals and make his own mark on social policy, Truman called for congressional action in 1945 on a plan of federally funded hospital construction, expanded public health programs, medical research, and medical education along with two social insurance programs: one for replacement of lost wages due to sickness or disability, and the other to provide a program of national health insurance funded through Social Security taxes.⁵³ Introduced in another Wagner-Murray-Dingell bill, the national health insurance plan's financing provisions were written so that it could be referred to the Education and Labor Committee, chaired by Senator Murray, rather than the more conservative Finance Committee. But even this committee failed to report a bill before the Republicans took over Congress in the 1946 elections. National health insurance became a major issue in the 1948 campaign when Truman railed against the "do nothing" Congress and accused Republicans of allying with the AMA—which had been highly critical of Truman's proposal—to obstruct health care reform. Even though Democrats picked up seats, the conservative coalition still held the balance of power, and Truman's plan fared no

better. Once again, health care reform died in committee. Although Truman never abandoned his proposal for national health insurance, the Democrats lost seats in the 1950 elections, and the conservative coalition emerged even stronger.

In a pattern that would continue to characterize battles over health reform for the rest of the century, there were deep divisions over how to approach the issue. These divisions appeared on the first day of hearings on the Wagner-Murray-Dingell bill when Senator Taft interrupted Murray's opening remarks to assert that Murray's health care bill, like his full-employment bill, came straight out of the Soviet constitution. Taft later sponsored a bill providing grants to the states to offer health coverage for those who could not afford it. Other proposals built on the developing system of private health insurance. Democratic senator Lister Hill of Alabama joined Republican senator George Aiken in introducing a bill to provide federal assistance to the states to subsidize private insurance premiums for low-income people. A pair of Republican senators, Ralph Flanders (R-VT) and Irving Ives (R-NY), introduced a bill to set up locally managed private insurance systems with premiums scaled to participants' incomes. Organized labor and most liberal advocates of national health insurance were adamantly opposed to such private-sector plans. The most promising effort at compromise, which even gained the support of organized labor, occurred in late 1947 when advocates of national health insurance, hoping to go into the 1948 elections with a unified Democratic position, entered into negotiations with Southern Democrats on a plan to set up compulsory health insurance for lower-income groups under Social Security and allow upper-income groups to obtain private insurance.⁵⁴ These negotiations broke down the following spring after Truman made it clear he planned to pursue the issue of civil rights. Although the public appeared open to both government and private-sector approaches, no reform proposal had enough support in Congress to make it out of committee.⁵⁵ Without a compromise that could draw some support from the conservative coalition while retaining the backing of labor-liberals, health care reform had no chance of passing.

The same dynamic on health care was also apparent in the Eisenhower administration. Hoping to induce private insurers to offer coverage of vulnerable populations, Eisenhower proposed a reinsurance plan in which the government would pick up catastrophic health care costs.⁵⁶ The AMA denounced the bill as a step in the direction of socialized medicine, while the AFL, the CIO, and other

liberal groups criticized the bill as wholly inadequate. When the reinsurance proposal reached the House floor in 1954, the overwhelming majority of Democrats and more than a third of Republicans voted to recommit it.⁵⁷ Diehard conservatives in both parties voted against the bill because they did not want the government interfering with private insurance, while liberal Democrats voted against it because they favored a more comprehensive approach. However, labor and most Democrats did support an Eisenhower proposal to codify the exemption of employer-provided health insurance from taxes, which ultimately encouraged the growth of private health insurance.⁵⁸ Successful legislative coalitions were also built behind bills in both the Truman and Eisenhower administrations to expand government-subsidized hospital construction and medical research. But a compromise on health care coverage proved elusive.⁵⁹

Lessons from the Health Care Fight

The strength of interest group opposition to national health care and the weakness of interest group support—primarily organized labor—are often cited as major factors in the failure of health reform during the Truman years.⁶⁰ The powerful AMA, with locally prominent and politically active doctors in every congressional district, fought national health insurance tooth and nail. The AMA was joined by other organizations that had a stake in fending off national health insurance, such as the nonprofit and commercial health insurance providers that proliferated in the early to mid-forties including the American Hospital Association, which provided Blue Cross / Blue Shield plans. Influential business groups such as the Chamber of Commerce also opposed the bill on general principles as anti-free enterprise and un-American. Interest group opponents of national health insurance were particularly effective in tapping into the rising red scare by identifying the proposal with socialist and Communist influence. To counter these groups, supporters of national health insurance formed the Committee for the Nation's Health (CNH), a coalition of labor, farm, minority, and consumer organizations plus a liberal, splinter group of doctors that supported greater government involvement in health care. The AFL and the CIO were two of the more active members, and they made extensive efforts to build the support of their memberships and the general public for national health insurance. But the spending of the AMA to fight the proposal dwarfed that of the CNH and other national health insurance supporters.

However, as several scholars have pointed out, the interest group opposition

alone was not determinative of the outcome on national health insurance.⁶¹ Groups like the AMA were influential because their interests coincided with those of pivotal players in Congress and other interest groups such as business.⁶² Republicans were vociferously opposed to Truman's domestic agenda, and conservative rural and Southern Democrats were unwilling to go along with what they saw as legislation geared to Truman's urban and labor constituencies. Southern Democrats were also concerned about the attention to equality of access to health care in Truman's proposals and supported his hospital construction bill only after securing provisions protecting segregated facilities.⁶³ Thus, committees with majorities hostile to national health insurance were quite receptive to the arguments of interest group opponents. In other fights, such as the struggle over disability policy, the AMA's opposition was overcome because the proponents of reform made concessions that broke the unity of the conservative coalition. But this did not happen in the struggle over national health insurance.

Labor responded to the lack of movement on national health insurance in two ways. As detailed in the next chapter, organized labor increasingly sought to negotiate private health insurance benefits through collective bargaining, and it shifted to a focus on more incremental reforms, recognizing the need to accommodate to political reality. In a fight within the CNH in early 1950 over the coalition's strategy, the AFL and CIO tipped the balance in favor of continued focus on lobbying for national health insurance instead of shifting to more obtainable but less comprehensive goals as advocated by some groups. However, after the 1950 elections and particularly after the 1952 election of Eisenhower, attention within the labor movement and other reform circles turned to incremental proposals. This shift in attention would later result in the push for Medicare, which picked up momentum in the late fifties and early sixties. As Jacob Hacker has emphasized, institutions are central to the evolution of policy, but so are the timing and sequence of events.⁶⁴ The failure of national health insurance in the 1940s largely foreclosed the chance of ever adopting universal, comprehensive, government-funded single-payer health care because the subsequent growth of private insurance in the absence of a government program shut off that option. Universal health care might still be possible, but it was likely to build on, rather than replace, the existing system. However, it would be decades before labor would fully back away from its support of a single-payer system.

Continuing Influence of the Conservative Coalition on Labor Law

As with health care reform, liberals and conservatives were drawn to a stalemate on labor law reform for a little over a decade. Liberals could not repeal Taft-Hartley, and conservatives could not pass greater restrictions on organized labor. But in contrast to the stalemate on health care, that on labor law was briefly and unexpectedly broken in 1959 when Congress passed the Landrum-Griffin bill—which was targeted at union corruption—in a form opposed by organized labor. But the stalemate resumed after the passage of this legislation and has held for the past fifty years.

The Effort to Repeal Taft-Hartley

Just as Republicans had viewed their election in 1946 as a mandate to curb union power, organized labor viewed the 1948 results as a mandate for repeal of Taft-Hartley.⁶⁵ But the American electoral and party systems rarely produce clear voter mandates on public policy. A congressional majority of those who had voted for Taft-Hartley in the first place returned to Congress in 1948.⁶⁶ The entire state Democratic delegations of Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Texas, and Virginia were opposed to repeal.

If the conservative coalition remained unified, there was little chance of repealing Taft-Hartley, but the Truman administration and congressional allies made an effort to reward their labor supporters. After initial disputes on strategy, the Truman administration and organized labor put together a bill to repeal Taft-Hartley while incorporating several provisions to take care of widespread concerns about particular labor abuses that had been addressed in Taft-Hartley. Unlike most of the other legislation discussed in this chapter, the House Labor and Education Committee's action on the repeal of Taft-Hartley was favorable to labor because of the composition of the committee and because it was chaired by the sponsor of the bill, Representative John Lesinksi (D-MI). However, the Rules Committee refused to grant Lesinksi's request for a closed rule, which prohibited floor amendments. The conservative coalition favored a substitute bill sponsored by Representative John S. Wood (D-GA) that would have preserved most of Taft-Hartley's provisions. House Speaker Sam Rayburn's efforts to whittle away support for the Wood bill in favor of another compromise were undermined when, in a hasty answer to a reporter's question at a press

conference that angered Southern Democrats, Truman publicly claimed he would use a vote on repeal to award patronage.⁶⁷ The Wood substitute was narrowly adopted (217–203), with 66% of Southern Democrats joining 87% of Republicans in support of the bill. Only 7% of non-Southern Democrats supported the substitute. Labor and administration forces successfully maneuvered to have the substitute recommitted instead of allowing it to pass on the floor. Labor fared no better in the Senate. Senator Taft, assisted by yet another miners' strike and the support of the conservative coalition, narrowly succeeded in pushing amendments to the administration bill that would have preserved most of Taft-Hartley's provisions. The amended bill passed the Senate but died along with the Wood bill in the House Committee on Education and Labor under labor pressure. AFL president William Green argued that the failure to achieve repeal was due to the "obstructionists" in Congress and added that the "leaders of Toryism welded the surviving remnants of the Republican forces into a tight coalition with the Southern Democrats" to check the mandate of the 1948 elections.⁶⁸ Repeal of the full Taft-Hartley Act was never considered again in Congress.

Stalemate on labor law reform continued into the Eisenhower years. The administration initially indicated it was open to repeal of some Taft-Hartley provisions.⁶⁹ However, when information leaked that the administration was considering the repeal of 14(b), which permitted states to pass right-to-work laws, there was an immediate backlash among business interests. The flap ultimately led to the resignation of Eisenhower's labor secretary, and the president dropped his support for repeal. The Republican Party as a whole was far too closely allied with business interests to make it a viable vehicle for pro-labor law reform, and labor's partisan political activities minimized its influence with the administration.

The multiple veto points in the legislative process that so often benefited labor's opponents by allowing them to kill a bill could also help organized labor when it was under attack, and party loyalty occasionally worked to labor's advantage. Although liberal forces were not strong enough to push pro-labor changes to Taft-Hartley, they were strong enough to fend off pro-business changes. As they did in the aftermath of the 1946 elections, business and conservatives viewed unified Republican control of the government produced by the 1952 elections as an opportunity to further scale back the legal protections for organized labor. Conservatives on the House Committee on Education and Labor drew up proposals to expand Taft-Hartley to prohibit all union security

arrangements by national law and to cede a great deal of authority over labor relations to state governments. Weak labor states could ensure they remained that way, and businesses could try to curtail labor power in another arena. Liberals on the committee rallied to labor's side, and a bill was never reported. A similar effort to grant power to the states was led in the Senate by Senator Barry Goldwater (R-AZ) in 1954. When the bill came up for a floor vote, labor lobbyists in a frenetic effort supported by then minority leader Johnson managed to muster enough votes, including those of a number of Southern Democrats, to recommit the bill and avert a floor vote.⁷⁰

The Path to Landrum-Griffin

In the late fifties the issue of labor law reform picked up steam again. Public interest was fed by the 1954 release of the Academy Award-winning *On the Waterfront*, which focused on the corruption of the longshoremen's union. Conservatives, having been unsuccessful in passing legislation to curb labor's power, hoped to take advantage of the corruption issue.⁷¹ In 1957 the Senate authorized a special committee to investigate union corruption headed by conservative Southern Democrat John McClellan (D-AR). The highly publicized investigations focused on the misappropriation of funds, extortion, and ties to organized crime of the Teamsters under the infamous Jimmy Hoffa and a handful of other unions. They largely ignored employers' role, instead portraying complicit employers as victims of power-hungry union leaders.⁷² The growing backlash led the AFL-CIO to expel the Teamsters. The hearings also called attention to unions like the United Mine Workers, which developed under the autocratic leadership of John L. Lewis into a union with no protections or voice for the rank and file or insurgent leaders. Three-quarters of the public claimed to have heard about union corruption and racketeering in the news in 1958, and by 1959, 67% felt "the government should do a lot more to regulate the activities of labor unions."⁷³

Afraid the issue of union corruption would become a problem for the Democratic Party, which conservatives portrayed as captive to labor,⁷⁴ and fearing that failure to act might lead to draconian antiunion legislation, Senator John F. Kennedy took the lead in proposing legislation to deal with the problem in both the 85th and 86th Congresses. Kennedy's legislation required unions and their officers to file public reports regarding their finances and promoted democratic procedures in the administration of unions. The main issue in terms of legislative strategy was whether a clean anticorruption bill could pass or

whether conservatives and administration forces would succeed in attaching amendments closing loopholes in the Taft-Hartley Act's prohibition of secondary boycotts and banning organizational picketing, whereby unions picketed plants to try to get the workers to join. Kennedy was successful in shepherding his first bill, cosponsored with Senator Ives (R-NY), through committee and floor consideration without substantial changes. Labor grudgingly accepted the bill in the Senate but found an opportunity to stop it in the House Education and Labor Committee, where labor had successfully lobbied for the appointment of pro-labor members to vacant seats, gradually shifting the committee to the left. Pro-labor members and conservative members deadlocked and could not report a bill.⁷⁵ An effort to pass a bill on the floor under suspension of the rules, a rarely used procedure that allows a vote on a bill that has not been reported by a committee but requires a two-thirds majority to pass, was unsuccessful. Labor would not be so lucky in the 86th Congress.

A wave of liberals were elected in 1958, and organized labor had high hopes that the conservative coalition might be destabilized on a range of issues including labor law reform. The newly merged AFL-CIO planned a campaign to repeal some of the most hated Taft-Hartley provisions, including Section 14(b), in the 86th Congress. However, an unexpected turn of events in 1959 resulted not in the repeal of unfavorable provisions but in the passage of a handful of amendments to Taft-Hartley—in a bill targeting union corruption—that labor opposed. As in the previous Congress, the conservative coalition did not pose significant problems in committee on the corruption bill. Instead, trouble emerged on the House floor, where labor and liberal forces were simply outmaneuvered by the seasoned old hands of the conservative coalition.

Now clearly an aspiring presidential candidate, Kennedy joined with Senator Sam Ervin (D-NC) to introduce a new anticorruption measure in 1959 that incorporated many of the measures of Kennedy's earlier bill but added a few "sweeteners" to make it more palatable to labor. Conservatives were again determined to attach antilabor Taft-Hartley amendments to the anticorruption bill, while labor resisted compromise because it overestimated its power to stop the bill in the new Congress. After all, labor had managed to defeat the anticorruption legislation in the House in 1958, and numerous liberals had been added in the 1958 elections. Acting as labor's advocate, Kennedy preserved the sweeteners and fended off most of the proposed antilabor Taft-Hartley provisions in committee and on the Senate floor. But labor again tried to get the House to drop

the bill altogether or at least reduce its scope. By the time the bill was taken up in the House, labor union leaders and lobbyists were described by Representative Richard Bolling (D-MO) as “bullish” about their legislative prospects.⁷⁶ However, as the McClellan investigations continued into the summer, picking up more newspaper headlines, Speaker Rayburn made it clear that Democrats had to get a bill.⁷⁷ Democratic leaders were concerned about the party’s prospects in a presidential election year if it looked responsible for obstructing an anti-corruption bill. Labor allies in the House warned lobbyists to confront the reality that a bill was going to pass, probably with provisions that labor opposed, and they had better get into the negotiations or risk losing influence on the bill.

After extensive negotiations and debate, the House Education and Labor Committee finally reported a bill similar to the modified Senate bill on a narrow vote. Shortly thereafter, two conservative representatives, Phil Landrum (D-GA) and Robert Griffin (R-MI), introduced another bill favored by conservatives that contained the provisions dealing with secondary boycotts and organizational picketing. Dissatisfied with the committee bill, the AFL-CIO had Representative John Shelley (D-CA), a former leader of the California AFL-CIO, introduce yet another anticorruption measure. When the issue came to the floor, things moved very quickly, and neither labor lobbyists nor their allies in the House were able to keep up. With the disarray caused by a division of liberal forces between the committee bill and the AFL-CIO bill, enhanced by a lack of communication and time for building consensus, the Landrum-Griffin language was substituted for the committee bill on the House floor by a vote of 229–201. It was a tremendous victory for the conservative coalition and a big defeat for the ascendant liberal Democrats: only 6% of non-Southern Democrats voted for the substitute, compared with 78% of Southern Democrats and 89% of Republicans.⁷⁸ George Meany blamed the large numbers of Southern Democrats defecting from the party leadership’s position on a deal between the Southerners and Republicans to produce the antilabor legislation in exchange for help fighting civil rights legislation.⁷⁹ After several procedural maneuvers, the bill finally passed the House by a large margin because even liberals felt they had to have a union corruption bill and this was the only option left. In conference, Kennedy struggled to soften the provisions that were most objectionable to labor and even to include new sweeteners. But the House conferees knew that Kennedy, as an aspiring presidential candidate, had to have a bill, and they barely budged. The final bill was much closer to the House version. It

was through this convoluted series of events that the most liberal Congress since the mid-thirties managed to pass a labor bill staunchly opposed by organized labor.

Several lessons came out of labor's defeat on Landrum-Griffin. Liberals realized they needed to strengthen their procedural skills and information networks if they were going to successfully take on the conservative coalition. As discussed in Chapter 4, passage of Landrum-Griffin spurred the creation of the Democratic Study Group, a coalition dedicated to countering the influence of the conservative coalition by more effectively leveraging the power of House liberals in the Democratic Caucus and the legislative process. It also became clear that given labor's limited influence in the South, it was necessary to win big elsewhere in order to be able to overcome the conservative coalition on contentious labor issues. As a 1960 report from the merged AFL-CIO's electoral arm, the Committee on Political Education (COPE), noted, "Using the vote on the Landrum-Griffin substitute as a criterion, it will be necessary to reelect all incumbent liberals and gain at least 14 to obtain a liberal majority in the House."⁸⁰ But labor leaders felt that their ability to build a liberal majority was undermined by the South's role in the Democratic Party and its prominence in a series of interlocking institutions in the electoral system and the legislative process.

Labor's Increasing Frustration

The failure of Congress to act on much of the Fair Deal agenda or to repeal Taft-Hartley in Truman's second term, after labor had worked so hard to elect him and a Democratic Congress, led to growing calls for reform. Near the conclusion of the Truman administration, a report prepared by CIO president Philip Murray before his unexpected death, which was to have been presented to the CIO's convention, summed up labor's position:

The control over the 82nd Congress by the "DixieGOP Coalition" reemphasizes the urgent need for reforms in election procedures and revision of the methods by which Congress conducts its legislative business.

Anti-democratic conditions that persist in the selection of Senators and Representatives in parts of our nation, coupled with the Congressional committee tenure system, continue to concentrate power over legislation in the hands of a comparatively small number of reactionary members.

Gerrymandered Congressional Districts and widespread failure of states to reapportion districts in accordance with population shifts are denying millions of Americans the full value of their vote. These factors, in combination with the poll tax, permit a minority of the population to control Congress and open the door to overwhelming influence on legislation by reactionary vested interests.

Labor has been made especially aware of this shortcoming through the fantastic make-up of the House Labor Committee, which has been dominated by members from agricultural districts who possess practically no understanding at all of the complexities of industrial relations.⁸¹

Labor called for civil rights legislation and reforms of the electoral process as well as reforms of congressional procedures, including the filibuster in the Senate, the role of seniority in selecting members for powerful committees and committee chairs in the House, and the power of the House Rules Committee. As Richard Bensele has noted, Democratic congressional leaders and non-Southern committee chairs defended the congressional committee system and seniority as a way to preserve what he terms the "bipolar coalition" of Southern and non-Southern Democrats by keeping divisive battles off the floor and behind closed doors.⁸² While these institutions had developed in part to minimize intraparty struggles, by the 1950s, as liberals became increasingly frustrated with conservatives' use of the committee system to undermine their policy goals, these institutions became an independent source of conflict in the party.

A lengthy 1950 letter from UAW president Walter Reuther to Democratic National Committee chair William Boyle railed against House Speaker Sam Rayburn's leadership and the Senate Democratic leaders who had struggled to hold the disparate segments of the party together. The letter noted, "At some point in our political life this question of re-alignment of power within the Democratic Party must be faced up to by both labor supporters of the Fair Deal and by the Fair Deal segments within the Democratic Party."⁸³ Labor leaders stressed to party leaders that reforms were key to building an effective liberal coalition. Without them, labor argued, the electoral fortunes of the Democratic Party would be compromised because the party could not deliver on its promises. Reuther's letter threatened, "We just cannot keep on getting out the vote for 2 and 4 years more of defeat by persons and groups who, while technically Democratic, are actually working with reactionary Republicans to defeat the program for which we seek to enlist our members' support through PAC, registration and voting."⁸⁴ Reuther and others stressed that Southern obstruction on

civil rights and the Fair Deal agenda was undermining the appeal of the party outside the South. Although there were many other factors involved, the 1952 elections reinforced these observations. The only states that the Democratic nominee, Adlai Stevenson, carried were in the South or the border states, and control of Congress was returned to the Republicans.

Throughout the Eisenhower administration, labor and its liberal allies argued that the cooperation of Southern Democrats with the administration undermined the Democrats' electoral appeal. Democrats debated the future of the party in the wake of the 1952 election with the Southern wing arguing that the party had moved too far to the left and the urban labor-liberal wing arguing that the party was tarnished by the power exerted by Southern conservatives. Donald Montgomery, chief lobbyist of the UAW, noted that the continued appeasement of Southern conservatives "would mean decline of the Democratic Party to a sectional status" and the triumph of the Republicans and their policies "for years to come." He implored his boss, Walter Reuther, "A determined fight must be made NOW to save the Democratic Party, not for its own sake, but for the welfare and security of the Nation and the cause of freedom everywhere."⁸⁵ Frustration among labor leaders reached a new level in the late fifties and early sixties.⁸⁶ In 1960 labor leaders, angered by inaction on their legislative program and the passage of Landrum-Griffin, again threatened Democratic officials with boycotting the 1960 elections unless the Democratic Party seriously pursued congressional reform to weaken the power of the conservative coalition.⁸⁷

Following Kennedy's election, a 1961 AFL-CIO pamphlet entitled "Labor's Goals for a Better America" noted, "The new Administration and the new Congress have much to do in the days ahead, and much of it must be done quickly. A wide range of progressive measures has already been subjected to exhaustive hearings and thorough debate; what they need now is enactment, not further investigation. . . . Freed from the threat of Presidential veto, guided by leadership that looks forward instead of back, Congress can now enact with confidence what it knows is best for the nation."⁸⁸ The pamphlet proceeded to tick off a list of labor's legislative priorities that were stalled at some point in the legislative process. Aid to depressed areas had been vetoed twice, and a veto threat held back health benefits for the aged. Public housing and urban renewal bills had passed the Senate only to be stymied by the House Rules Committee. Eisenhower had thrice requested another labor priority, legislation to reverse a court decision that forbade certain forms of picketing on construction sites, but

it died in the Rules Committee in the House and was filibustered in the Senate Labor Committee.⁸⁹ The Rules Committee also effectively killed a bill on federal aid to education when it refused to send the House-passed bill to conference with the Senate. A minimum wage bill died in conference between the House and Senate. The pamphlet also noted that “effective civil rights legislation” could never be “realistically expected” unless the filibuster rule in the Senate was altered to allow cloture to be invoked by a simple majority rather than two-thirds vote. The labor movement hoped that the Kennedy administration might finally bring about the destabilization of the conservative coalition and its hold on Congress. This did not happen. But as the next chapter explains, after Kennedy’s tragic assassination, Lyndon Johnson’s administration did enjoy a brief period during which the conservative coalition was temporarily overwhelmed.

Conclusion

While union membership reached its peak of 35% of the nonagricultural labor force in 1954, union density was not translated into commensurate political accomplishments.⁹⁰ After decades of concentrating on improving workers’ status through collective bargaining rather than public policy, organized labor became the most powerful advocate of expansion of the welfare state in the postwar period. But the political coalition favoring a comprehensive, national, universal welfare state and pro-labor policies was not strong enough to overcome the opposition of the conservative coalition. The only measures that were successful were those that could peel off support from the conservative coalition. This typically meant incremental or targeted programs that preserved the autonomy of the states or limited coverage. In fact, this did not mark much of a break with the New Deal. The social insurance and public assistance programs in the Social Security Act, the NLRA, the FLSA, and many of the other major accomplishments of the 1930s were similarly compromised to gain Southern support. Although some scholars suggest that the liberal postwar agenda was a move to the right of the New Deal,⁹¹ a program like universal, national health insurance moved beyond the political consensus behind most New Deal programs. Many New Deal reformers may have envisioned more far-reaching proposals, but it is not clear they ever had a chance of passing in Congress. A number of scholars mourn labor’s “depoliticization” and acceptance of “consensus politics” in the forties, suggesting that if labor had been less willing to

settle, it would have had a better chance of securing social democratic-style policies.⁹² But given the political context, it is hard to see how this was possible. In fact, as David Plotke has suggested, “the main alternatives” were not social democracy but “well to the right” of the direction policy actually took.⁹³ Moreover, as indicated by labor’s position on national health insurance, labor did not always move to the center in the 1940s. But lowered expectations shaped the legislative agenda going into the Great Society years.