

Labor In A New Light

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FOR the Democratic party, the Eisenhower triumph in the November election represented the change of fortune that the party long in the driver's seat must expect when the opposition finds dynamic leadership. But for the unions, the powerful Congress of Industrial Organizations and the American Federation of Labor, defeat was especially bitter. The labor unions had made a fiercely intensive fight for the Fair Deal, and the setback has been a staggering blow to pride and prestige. They had sought to enlist in the political struggle against resurgent Republicanism the millions of organized workers and their families. They had dictated the choice of a candidate for the presidency, determined the shape and content of the militant liberal party platform in Chicago, ruled out any compromise with southerners and moderates, drained union treasuries for campaign funds, and had done everything a committed leadership could do. All the endeavors were to no avail. The GOP swept to victory. The advocates of the hated Taft-Hartley Act were endorsed by the electorate. Success crowned the efforts of candidates who had spurned the support of the labor chiefs. The plums of political victory were shaken from the tree by the conservative forces in the land.

The rejection of the Fair Deal had been a bewildering experience to the labor chiefs. They and the intellectuals who united beneath the Stevenson standard were of the conviction that the overwhelming mass of laboring men in unions had a firm belief

in the avowed union objectives in the political realm and had it within their power to assure the continuation of organized labor's role of master in the house of government. How gravely mistaken they were and to what an extent the country at large was deluded is now understood. The conceptions as to labor omnipotence, once widely held, will be reappraised. The alleged might and dominion of unions will be examined with a cold and suspicious eye.

Looked at as a success story, the unions seem to fill all the requirements. Generally speaking, American union leaders have been viewed as masterful men possessed of vast power. The salaries paid to union chiefs have been lordly, their retinue elaborate. Their relations with magnates of American business indicated that many executives lived in fear and trembling of organized labor's power. Union leaders have been prominent in the hundreds of semi-public causes that litter the American landscape and serve as sounding boards and places for self-advertisement. The Democratic administrations gave them a royal welcome at the White House. Cabinet members these twenty years past have kowtowed to their slightest desire. A union leader's wish was the government's command. In the American mind has been developing the image of union chiefs as tribal rulers with a vast bloc of votes to deliver and, thereby, engineer an election. Today this image is in process of dissolving.

What has not been understood these many years is that the American labor movement has a basic weakness, namely that its power has been handed down from above. It is significant that in the Congress no labor strength is manifest. Unionists have not been elected to Congress in any numbers. To be sure, there have been representatives who have expressed the views of labor and who have voted as labor has desired. Nonetheless, it is evident that a congressman with a good labor voting record is not the same as having a bloc of unionists in the House of Representatives and the Senate. In these frequently criticized but most representative legislative bodies organized labor has not been master. The friends of organized labor have been unable to repeal the Taft-Hartley Act.

THE difference between the labor unions in England and the unions in the United States, is that the growth of the former has been slow and from solid foundations whereas the American unions have known a mushroom growth almost overnight. Significant also is that this mushroom growth was the result of energetic measures by New Dealers who were disposed to grant extraordinary favors to organized labor at the expense of management and the public. When Roosevelt entered upon the national scene in 1933 membership in American unions was not in excess of four millions. With the single exception of the coalfields, the basic industries of the land had not been organized. Then the enactment of the National Labor Relations Act provided the labor chiefs with an instrument of vast power, and within a short time industrial management was less than an equal of the unions. Business was forced to capitulate to the demands of the labor chiefs who, most appropriately, have been dubbed "czars." Underground in the coal mines nothing was mined save on the orders of John L. Lewis. On the high seas shipping was at a standstill when the steamship companies did not heed the words of Joseph Curran. This totalitarian situation prevailed until the enactment of Mr. Taft's reforming law. And this very law has been subjected to the vilification

not only of organized labor but of the Truman administration. Always the Great White Father in Washington was to be counted upon to turn a hand for the labor movement or to support it by inaction—refusal to use the law on the books, that is. In return for this benevolence it was expected that organized labor would throw its full weight against the enemies of the Democratic party. The payoff was supposed to be at the polls.

By way of partial payment to the benefactor of the unions, the supremely militant labor organization, the CIO, created the Political Action Committee. This committee reserved for itself the lion's share of credit for the successes Roosevelt enjoyed in the last years of the New Deal. Though vice-presidential candidates may have had to pass the inspection of organized labor and have clearance from "Sidney" it is a matter of historical record the Democratic party created union power; the unions did not create the New Deal and the Fair Deal. In the light of recent study and experience it becomes more and more evident it was Roosevelt's dynamism that accomplished the Democratic victories. This Political Action Committee caused trouble for labor in a long term sense. It became a focus of resentment at the pressure tactics employed during the New Deal. Citizens who were not of the labor persuasion came to regard it as an alien-flavored device of political intimidation. In many ways the methods and quality of the committee violated the basically easy-going traditions of American politics. A clearcut reaction to CIO pressure did occur. In the State of Ohio, waging war against "Mr. Republican" Robert A. Taft, the CIO's Political Action Committee went down to defeat. This staunch exponent of conservatism won votes that the labor chiefs had counted as 'sure fire' labor votes. Taft's victory in the senatorial race heralded and made straight the way for Eisenhower's mandate in 1952.

UNTIL the early morning of November 5, 1952 the leaders of organized labor had delusions of grandeur. The long reign of the labor chiefs came to an end in

what was for labor the murky dark of the election aftermath. Somehow it had not occurred to the labor chiefs that the bogeyman of Big Business did not frighten even their own membership any longer and that the American people did not hesitate to manifest resentment toward the unions. None of the union chiefs grasped the fact that what a large section of the public desired was emancipation from the pressures and threats of the unions' leadership.

Since the fall of 1952 the reins of the labor unions have been taken over by new men. Philip Murray and William Green have vanished into history. The CIO and the AFL have new helmsmen, but it is likely that these chiefs are like the Bourbons who never learned or forgot anything. Instead of reexamining and revising union strategies and objectives, leaders such as Walter Reuther have planned to intensify the very political activities that antagonize the electorate. Reuther, who is heir to the traditions of the German social democrats, has not comprehended that the labor movement must become more deeply grounded in American life. As it is today the unions need to enlist the sympathies of a greater number of people outside of organized labor. It is not militancy that the CIO and AFL need, it is roots and friends.

Now the unions are highly effective within industry. The strikes that take place are supported by the membership. There is considerable internal loyalty that is not conditioned by gangsterism. The printers are organized in a strong union. The management of American newspapers does not find cracks in the wall of loyalty when bargaining on the issues of wages and hours is underway. Cooperation of the membership is secured without pressure. However, this is not the picture when election time comes. The union loyalty does not hold. To be sure, it is almost impossible for a printer in a union organized newspaper composing room to assert that he is voting the straight Republican ticket. In fact, it is almost obligatory for union members to wear the badges of the union-supported candidate. But when the printer has the privacy of the voting booth he is free to cast his bal-

lot for whom he pleases, and so he does. The record of the presidential campaign indicates that many a union member crossed the political fence when he was protected by the secret ballot. The voting machine curtain defeats the propaganda efforts of the union chiefs who manipulate sentiment in meetings and conventions. The leadership considers this fence-crossing as a species of treason. Yet there is absolutely nothing they can do. The conscience of the union member is free even if his utterances at union meetings are not free. Thus it is that the secret ballot is a God-given gift to the working man in a sense that would have astonished the founders of unions in this country.

The American organized laborer has demonstrated time and time again that when it comes to a political question his union membership is not automatically the principal determining factor. Unionists prefer to exercise their own judgment rather than accept the dictates of their labor chiefs. John L. Lewis discovered this when he called for Roosevelt's defeat in 1944. Philip Murray had this harsh fact brought home to him in the twilight of his life. It is inevitable that Walter Reuther will discover this for himself in the fulness of time and several elections.

What this signifies is that when speaking on political issues not related to industrial relations in their wage and hour aspect the union leadership creates a heap of smoke and mighty little fire. Inasmuch as the last presidential election has shown that the effective political power of the labor chiefs is limited it is a certainty that the hearing given to the leadership will be limited also. Americans need not look upon this situation as an unhappy one, for during the period in which CIO and AFL chieftains received political authority they consistently refused to accept responsibility. It has not been the republic and the entire American political community that has been the terms in which the union have been thinking and acting, but rather in the narrow and partisan modes of old. Perhaps as the unionists realize they are in a position to make less extravagant claims, as they threaten the public more infrequently and rank on

fewer occasions, respect for organized labor will increase among a wider segment of the American population. The facts that have been revealed regarding the doubtful political loyalty of union members may bring labor leaders to a sound understanding of responsible opposition.

ORGANIZED labor has been a massive pressure group in American life. It has been a lobby on a grand scale. Unfortunately, labor statesmanship has never existed because the leadership has never made any attempt to dovetail its objectives with the desires and aims and diverse points of view of other groups in the republic. In the year 1953 it is not the powerful lobby it was only a year earlier when its war on the steel industry almost drove the country to a grave constitutional crisis. Labor will receive a considerate hearing at the White House. It will have a spokesman within the government. Nevertheless the days of glory have come to an end. The tyranny of the labor chieftains has been brought to a halt with the departure of the Truman administration. As a lobby, the forces of organized labor

have been utterly selfish and ruthless. The refusal on labor's part to subordinate its selfish ambition to the common weal has not endeared it to a large section of the American people. It is very much "in the dog house", so to speak. Organized labor in 1953 is a lobby, the influence of which has been checked.

Having failed to deliver the vote, the leadership of the unions should recognize that the privileges of King Labor are going to be eliminated. The movement should no longer believe the sweet nothings of its own propaganda inasmuch as the political warfare they waged was a failure, a conspicuous defeat. It is imperative that the lesson of the November election sink deep into the consciousness of Walter Reuther and the various advocates of militancy. The strong drink that Roosevelt and Truman gave the labor chieftains went to their head. The present demands sobriety on the part of organized labor—no extravagance whatever in assertions of political power. The golden years of "do-as-you-choose" have been dissipated. The prime requirement of the new epoch is responsibility and regard for the common weal.

