

Labor and the Democrats: It's Time for a Break

The Washington Post - Monday, February 25, 1985

Author: *Lance Compa*

The writer handles Washington-related matters for the United Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers of America.

With a weighty role in the selection of Paul Kirk as party chairman, organized labor has again shown its muscle in the high councils of the Democratic Party. Unfortunately, this latest exercise of power will only prolong a fruitless relationship. The unions' clout in party affairs reinforces the Democrats' negative image as a construct of special interests. At the same time, labor's heavy commitment to the Democratic Party as the sole outlet for trade union political action binds the unions to the bland, compromising, idea-wanting Democratic agenda.

It appears that little has been learned from the 1984 presidential campaign. Labor proved its strength in traditional Democratic circles by securing Walter Modale's nomination and delivering a solid majority of its members' votes. With only 20 percent of the work force union-represented, however, labor could not save a candidacy roundly rejected by the electorate. Concentrating its power in events such as the Kirk selection just solidifies labor's status as a big fish in a shrinking pond.

Pointing hopefully to Ronald Reagan's short coattails in congressional races and the prospect of a stalled Reagan program on Capitol Hill, the unions have apparently decided to sit tight and wait for the pendulum to swing back. If they wait too long, though, 20 percent union membership may look like the glory days after Reaganism runs its course. In the meantime, drawing sustenance from power-brokering in the Democratic National Committee only postpones the hard analysis, self-criticism and reconsideration of basic political strategy that the unions need to avoid that fate.

Instead of tightening them, the labor movement should be re-examining its links to the Democrats. Party officials are not bashful about it. "We have to quit running on labor's agenda," says one state chairman. "I want to get the hell out of the house of labor."

Unions might well consider taking up the offer. By tying themselves to the Democrats, unions have choked off opportunities for independent political action at the grass roots. In the long run, its members would be better served if labor strikes out for new political ground.

A move toward independent political action does not mean reverting to the old "reward your friends, punish your enemies" tradition that accepts the Republican and Democratic party monopoly on the political system. Nor does it mean moving immediately to third-party organizing or cutting off support for liberal Democrats (or liberal Republicans). Indeed, unions must work harder than ever for good candidates of either party -- or any party -- including, almost certainly, the 1988 Democratic

presidential nominee.

At the outset independent political action means more of a philosophical break: a recognition that the Democratic Party, whatever strains of liberalism it contains, is fundamentally a pro-business party that seeks always to accommodate, sometimes to temper but never to challenge corporate power. Once that break in outlook is made, unions can begin organizing grass-roots coalitions on issues, not on Democratic Party candidacies. They might also start organizing new members.

It is not the rise of high-technology and service sector industries, the shift of new production to the Sun Belt or a new generation of individualist workers that is eroding the strength of organized labor, as is so often argued. A supple, creative labor movement could fashion responses to these challenges. Some unions are beginning to do so. But the basic problem is that for the past 40 years the labor movement as a whole has not questioned the corporate enterprise system or the purported right of capital -- articles of faith in the Democratic Party.

Until the onset of the Cold War, a vibrant left in the labor movement, though never dominant, raised issues of capitalism and socialism, corporate power and worker power, private property rights and community rights, labor statesmanship and labor militance. By amputating its own left wing in a Cold War purge, the American labor movement narrowed the scope of its internal debates and cut off new initiatives in wider political affairs.

Entering into a consensus with business and government over corporate hegemony in the economy and the limited reach of collective bargaining, the labor movement foreclosed the shaping of an alternative vision of worker and community power. Limiting themselves to electoral activity with the two major parties -- and lately seeking organic fusion with one of them -- the unions gave up the chance of advancing an independent political program. In effect, the labor movement conceded a big chunk of its bargaining power on political and legislative issues before they were joined.

Public support and organizing success would be more forthcoming to a labor movement that acted more independently in political affairs and challenged employers more strongly. Anti-labor sentiment was perhaps more virulent in the 1930s than today, yet the Congress of Industrial Organizations, even under attack from the American Federation of Labor for being too radical, rallied millions of new members into its ranks. It also won the sympathy of millions more outside the labor movement who saw the militant CIO as a dynamic, democratic, fighting force for social change.

A labor movement today seen as a weakened, cut-our- losses defender of special interests -- however unfair that perception is -- cannot persuade a wider public to support a candidate so closely tied to the labor movement as was Walter Mondale. The same fate awaits future candidates of a labor-dominated Democratic Party.

Unions must admit that employers broke the Cold War consensus years ago with their

strike-breaking, concession demands, plant closings and runaway shops. The corporate offensive flourished in both Democratic and Republican administrations since the early 1970s and has left labor in a weakened state.

Striking out on a new course of independent political action means taking risks. New cries of "radicalism" will be raised, again not least within the labor movement itself, if unionists question the two-party system, corporate dominance of the economy and management control of the work place. But these are questions that will not be debated in the Democratic Party.

Without risking a vision of a new role for working people and their unions and communities, the labor movement will continue on its slide toward marginality.