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US Unions in a Time of Adversity

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IN THE SHADOWS OF SOCIAL DEMOCRACY

American unions are often thought of even by comparatively well informed observers to be far different from unions in other democracies in terms of their orientation to politics. American unions, the conventional wisdom holds, are likely to be narrowly focused on their self interest, as willing to work with right as with left of center politicians, devoid of any feeling of responsibility for the amelioration of the social conditions of the poorest citizens and nationalistic in their attitude to foreign policy. Perhaps fortunately in the light of this image, American unions are also thought of as unusually weak in terms of the proportion of the population they mobilize and the extent of their political influence. The weakness and the political characteristics of American unions are in short another aspect of American exceptionalism, the widespread belief both within the United States and elsewhere, that American politics is fundamentally different in character from politics in other advanced industrialized democracies.¹

Much of this characterization of American unions rests on comparisons with the unions in other countries that does not withstand closer scrutiny. American unions are held up against an idealized social democratic image that in fact exists in only a limited number of countries. It is There is often an unexamined assumption made that unions in all other countries are strongly committed to socialism, for example, an assumption that overlooks the important Christian union tradition in continental Europe. Union strength in the United States, as we shall see soon, has fallen to almost pathetically low levels. Yet the proportion of the workforce organized by unions is scarcely more impressive more impressive in European countries such as France. Even in countries such as Britain in which the relationship between unions and the left of center party has been deeply institutionalized, the craft unions had an extensive history of viewing attachment to a socialist labor party with suspicion; contrary to their more recent image, the coal miners thought long and hard before abandoning the strategy of working within the Liberal Party. One has the feeling that the standard for evaluating the political role of American unions has been based on the assumption that all the world is Scandinavia with a massive proportion of the workforce unionized and affiliated to a social democratic party.

Conventional wisdom usually holds at least an element of truth. It is the case that there are American unions that fir the popular stereotype. The Teamsters, for example, has spent more time in alliance with the Republicans than with the Democrats and is currently working with the Bush II Administration to open the Arctic National Wildlife Reserve to oil drilling. However, a number of now rather old studies by political scientists have challenged the view that American unions in general have been limited to a self centered or even conservative role in politics. J. David Greenstone argued that at least in some settings (such as Detroit in the 1960s,) unions could be the organizational basis of a progressive class based politics; the UAW's relationship to the Democrats was not radically different from that between unions and social democratic parties in northern Europe.² Wilson argued that the umbrella organization for American unions, the AFL-

¹ For my own views on the extent of American exceptionalism, see Graham K. Wilson, *Only in America?* (Chatham, NJ: Chatham House, 1998).

² J David Greenstone, *Unions in American Politics* 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977).

CIO, had been a bedrock of liberal politics in the 1960s providing major assistance for liberal Democrats through its electoral arm, the Committee on Political Education (COPE), lobbying support for measures such as the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Voting Rights Act of 1965 aid for the poor through Food Stamps and Medicare and government funded health care for the elderly.³ While there were indeed conservative unions such as the Teamsters and many of the building trades unions, the heavy preponderance of American unions were committed to liberal politicians and policies. In more recent work, Dark has documented this relationship thoroughly and extensively.⁴ The relationship between some American union leaders and the Democratic administrations of the 1960s was at least as close as that between union leaders and governments in neocorporatist countries in Europe. George Meany, the President of the AFL-CIO in this period, was used to frequent confidential conversations with President Johnson on the issues of the day. As Dark documents, the Johnson Administration was deeply appreciative of the assistance unions in general and the AFL-CIO in particular provided for its liberal domestic policy agenda. It was not implausible to suggest that the relationship between unions and the Democratic party that had developed was at least the shadow of the relationship between unions and social democratic parties in northern European countries such as Britain, Germany and Sweden. Unions provided the largest single source of campaign assistance, money and lobbying support for the Democrats; the Democrats provided the political means by which progressive policies could be adopted. Given the theoretical implications of the allegedly exceptional nature of American labor politics, the argument that in reality the relationship between unions and Democrats was at least the shadow of the relationship between unions and social democrats in Europe had some importance. Even in a country whose politics and society were supposedly highly resistant to class politics, the relationship between unions and politics turned out to be not so very different from that in Europe.

A number of shadows soon fell across this reassuring picture.

First, union membership plummeted.⁵ It is often forgotten that at their height in the early 1950s, American unions succeeded in organizing a similar proportion of the workforce to that in Britain in the same period (about 33% in the USA, about 35% in the UK), and of course considerably higher than unions recruited in France or Italy. American unions were therefore about as strong in the early 1950s as German unions have been in recent years. The last fifty years have seen a catastrophic decline in American union membership. Membership today is a about 13% of the workforce. Without the growth in public sector unions such as AFSCME (American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees) or the teachers' union, the National Education

³ Graham K Wilson, *Unions in American National Politics* (Houndmills: Macmillan, 1979).

⁴ Taylor Dark, *Unions and the Democrats, An Enduring Alliance* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999). See also Taylor Dark, "Labor and the Democratic Party: A Report on the 1998 Elections," *Journal of Labor Research* 21, No. 4 (Fall 2000) 627-641.

⁵ Michael Goldfield, *the Decline of Organized Labor in the United States* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).

Association, the decline of unions would have been even more precipitous. Indeed, unions recruit only about 9% of workers in the private sector.

TABLE 1. UNION MEMBERSHIP AS A PERCENTAGE OF THE WORKFORCE

	1983	1990	1997	2000
Wage and Salary Workers				
Union members	20.1	16.1	14.1	13.5
Public Sector	36.7	36.5	37.2	37.5
Private sector	16.5	11.9	9.79	0

Source: US Census Bureau, *Statistical Abstract of the United States 2001* (Washington DC: GPO, 2001) Table 637.

The second shadow was the disruption of the relationship between union leaders and the Democratic Party. As Dark describes, in the 1960s the AFL-CIO had a dominant leader, George Meany, who was accorded privileged access to the President and Democratic leaders more generally. Unions did not press for representation at Democratic Party Conventions but were accorded a de facto veto over unacceptable nominations; Democratic leaders well knew that union money was vital to their prospects of victory in November. Party reforms in the 1970s disrupted this relationship. The vast growth in presidential primaries ended the possibilities for by the ends influence at Conventions. Mandates the Democrats imposed on states for improved representation for the young, women and racial minorities seemed to reveal a preference among a new generation of their leaders for the interests of these groups over the interests of the working class.

A third and related shadow was the rise of cultural politics. Most union leaders including Meany had been able to interact easily with most liberal Democrats. From the late 1960s onwards, this was not necessarily the case. Meany himself was extremely antagonistic to any signs of the “counter culture” or wavering in patriotism. He often disparaged opponents of the Vietnam War as unkempt, promiscuous people with a traitorous cast of mind. While a substantial group of unions such as AFSCME, the UAW (United Auto Workers) and IAM (International Association of Machinists) did not share these attitudes, Meany spoke for many union leaders. While the extent of defection by union members to the Republicans has been exaggerated, Meany’s attitudes also found an echo among blue collar workers more generally.

A fourth shadow was cast by the rise of other interest groups associated with the Democrats. In the 1960s, unions had been more or less the only mass membership organized interest generally affiliated to the Democrats. This changed. The rise of the women’s movement and creation or rejuvenation of organizations such as the National Organization for Women (NOW), consumer groups and environmental organizations such as Greenpeace, Friends of the Earth and the Sierra Club changed the situation considerably. Unions were no longer the only likely source of volunteers, organizational aid and money for liberal Democratic candidates. This trend was reinforced by the attempts of Democrats to raise money from business. In the 1980s, a Democratic Representative, Tony Coelho, made serious efforts to persuade corporations that the

Democrats' control over the House (and often Senate) in that period made it wise for corporations to contribute to their campaigns. David Sousa documented a substantial decline in the proportion of PAC contributions coming from unions; whereas a little over half the campaign contributions to House Democrats used to come from unions, now the proportion was close to one third.⁶ While it was true that unions had sometimes sponsored the growth of new organizations, particularly those focused on civil rights and consumer protection, unions also came into conflict with new groups, for example those focused on the environment. Unions often felt that these groups paid more attention to the welfare of snail darter fish or spotted owls than to the needs of workers.

A fifth and nebulous shadow came from change in the intellectual atmosphere. The New Deal order was one that was intended to benefit a number of interests but unions were certainly high on that list.⁷ As the New Deal order decayed, this intellectual climate changed. We are familiar with one aspect of this change, namely the loss of faith in government and its capacity to address problems effectively. Attitudes to unions also changed not only in terms of their support among the general public but also among liberal intellectuals. The far left gave up on unions and indeed the working class disappointed that they refused to play their allotted historical role of burying capitalism. The image of construction workers in New York (always among the more conservative of workers and unions) marching in support of Richard Nixon and the war in Vietnam seared itself onto the consciousness of a generation of liberal activists. The sordid criminality of Hoffa and his henchmen in the Teamsters Union was seen as typical, not atypical, of unions.

As Dark notes, it is not necessarily the case that these unfavorable trends have translated into as sharp a decline in the political power of unions as the preceding might be supposed. As Dark documents, Democratic Presidents such as Clinton and Carter have sort to work with unions in advancing their agenda in return supporting (generally unsuccessfully) unions' goals such as labor law reform.⁸ Some changes in the Democratic Party have been to the advantage of unions. The decline in the proportion of the Democratic Party from the South has not only made the party a more united and more uniformly progressive party, but has removed a Congressional bane of unions' lives for many years, the conservative Southern Democratic Committee chairman. It used to be particularly irritating for unions (and for progressives more generally) that the workings of the seniority system meant that even under Democratic control of Congress, anti union, racist and conservative legislators chaired and controlled major committees. The rise of the Republican Party in the South and the transformation of Southern politics by the Voting Rights Act have made this situation uncommon. Democrats do not control Congress as often as in the past but Southern Democrats generally win by creating coalitions of African American and working class voters; they are generally almost as liberal as the Party in general.

⁶ David J. Sousa, "Organized Labor in the Electorate 1960-88" *Political Research Quarterly* 46 (1993) 741-758.

⁷ David Plotke, *Building a Democratic Political Order; Reshaping American Liberalism in the 1930s and 1940s* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

⁸ Dark, *Unions and the Democrats*.

It is also the case that the general changes that have occurred in American politics have worked to the advantage as well as disadvantage of unions. It is conventional wisdom that American Presidents (and probably legislators) are engaged in a “permanent campaign in governing. The White House, for example, has strengthened its capacity to reach out to interest groups through the Office of Public Liaison because it needs to work with interest groups in promoting its legislative agenda.⁹ Working “inside the Beltway” no longer suffices in getting controversial bills passed. Politicians need more money than ever before for their campaigns and unions play a crucial role in this respect. Table 2 lists the major sources of soft money (unrestricted gifts from general revenues) to the Democrats. Overall, unions accounted for 13% of the money raised from the Democrats’ top 50 donors. Seven of the top ten donors were unions.

TABLE 2. TOP SOFT MONEY DONORS TO DEMOCRATS

01/01/1999 to /12/31/2000

Donor	Amount
American Federation State, County and Municipal Workers	\$6,463,000
Service Employees Union International	5,090,696
United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners	2,925,000
Communication Workers of America	2,420,000
United Food and Commercial Workers	2,151,250
Thompson Medical Company	1,882,000
Peter L. Bittenweiser	1,832,500
American Federation of Teachers	1,794,000
International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers	1,646,000
Saban Entertainment	1,551,363
AT and T	1,457,469
AOL Time Warner	1,462,637
Sheet Metal Workers International Association	1,346,354
Peter Angelos	1,297,900
Ness, Motley, Loadholt, Richardson, and Poole	1,290,700
Davidi Gilo	1,232,500
Association of Trial Lawyers	1,196,300
William Bailey Law Firm	1,117,050
Vivendi Universal	1,100,794
Milstein Properties	1,084,389
Microsoft	1,029,792
Freddie Mac	1,025,000

⁹ Kathryn Dunn Tenpas, “The American Presidency: Surviving and thriving amidst the Permanent Campaign” in Norman Ornstein and Thomas Mann (eds), *The Permanent Campaign* (Washington, DC: AEI Press, 2000).

Global Crossing Development Co	1,007,768
Laborers' International Union	995,000
Fred Eychaner	981,870
International Brotherhood Painters	935,000
SBC Communications	895,718
AFL-CIO	887,100
Yucaipa Cos	878,732
Dream Works	873,000
Walt Disney Co.	822,798
National Education Assoc.	801,500
O'Quinn, Kerensky, McAninch, and Laminack	800,000
Aviation Products Management	795,700
Ha-Lo Industries	715,427
Cablevision Systems	710,000
David Shimmon	705,000
Terrance Watanbe	700,000
Stephen Bing	685,000
Shorenstein Co.	675,698
MGM	658,086
Citigroup	641,204
Goldman Sachs	633,250
International Association of Machinists	631,000
Metabolife International	628,000
American Financial Group	622,000
Steven Kirsch	619,000
Reaud Morgan and Quinn	610,000
Davis Cos	609,000
TOTAL TOP 50	\$215,549,758
TOTAL FROM UNIONS	\$26,924,400
Percentage from unions	13%

Source: Common Cause, "The Soft Money Laundromat"(<http://commoncause.org>)

Unions play a vital role in financing the Democrats through soft money. Much the same is true in terms of "hard money" contributions made through Political Action Committees (PACs.) The Democrats' loss of control of Congress in 1994 was in many ways a political disaster for the unions. All the friendly Committee chairs and their staffs were swept away to be replaced by sharply antagonistic Republicans. One somewhat compensating factor, however, was that the Democrats' new minority status made them much less attractive to corporations as recipients of PAC contributions or soft money. Coelho had persuaded corporations that they needed to contribute to Democrats because

of their majority status in Congress; once that status was lost, corporations had much less incentive to give to Democrats. As Shoup has argued, the proportion of corporate political money flowing to Democrats declined after the 1994 elections.¹⁰ This trend is evident in Table 3 although as the Democrats came close to regaining control of both the House and Senate in 2000, they were able to attract an increased proportion of corporate money. Particularly in the House, Democrats have been more dependent, not less, on unions since the 1994 elections.

TABLE 3. CORPORATE AND UNION PAC CONTRIBUTIONS TO DEMOCRATS

	Corporate	Union
Senate		
2000	\$5,109,697	\$6,205,849
1998	\$6,910,086	\$5,424,626
1996	\$3,656,145	\$6,518,733
1994	\$7,842,309	\$7,099,469
House		
2000	\$22,007,352	\$39,901,516
1998	\$16,157,157	\$34,084,311
1996	\$15,426,879	\$36,848,116
1994	\$23,588,613	\$31,887,788

Source: Federal Elections Commission, “PAC Contributions to Candidates 1994 Through 2000 Election Cycles” (<http://www.fec.gov>).

Unions were not able to translate this increased dependence of the Democrats on them politically into measures to halt their decline in the workforce. The Republican majorities in Congress made sure that no labor law reform would pass and without that reform it was unlikely that an increase in union strength would occur. It would be easy to place the decline of American unions in terms of their industrial strength in the tradition of American exceptionalism. The era of union strength, we might argue, was a brief interruption to the American tradition of individualism. Mass unionism became established only with the help of government in the New Deal era; a generation later in the 1970s, the signs of decay were evident and in the 1980s the edifice of union strength collapsed.

On further reflection, however, it is clear that the trends that have afflicted American unions have clear counterparts in other advanced industrialized democracies. The problems of American unions are not unique but are part of a more general crisis of social democracy and the labor movement. Unions have lost strength on all advanced

¹⁰ Daniel Schoup *Trade Blows: Party Competition and the U.S. Trade Policy in a Globalizing Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001.)

industrialized democracies as employment in the industries in which they have been strongest traditionally (coal mining, steel, automobile manufacturing et cetera) has declined. These changes have also impelled social democratic parties to look for support from white collar, professional class and non unionized voters. This trend has been particularly important in highly majoritarian, first past the post political systems such as Britain's. The "New Labour" project was very much about attracting voters to the Party who did not and would not belong to a union; one of the oddities on which the current huge Labour majority in Parliament rests is its success in winning constituencies in the distant parts of London's commuter belt. In February 2002, the leader of the Labour Party, Tony Blair, caused a considerable stir by attacking "wreckers" in public sector unions who sought to bar changes such as partial privatization that Blair considered vital to their improvement. Blair probably strengthened his image as a "New Labour" leader not in thrall to unions by making this attack. As in the United States, left of center policy intellectuals also came to see unions as part of the problem, not the solution. The proponents of the "Third Way" such as Anthony Giddens certainly viewed unions with skepticism. On the marginalized shores of the far left only the occasional disruptive union official willing to inflict further misery on London commuters on South West Trains services attracted any favor. It is possible that like countries in a world wide recession, the weakest labor movements are the worst affected; social democracy and unions may have changed little in Scandinavia and have suffered more in the United States. In general, however, both unions and social democracy have suffered a decline worldwide, not only in America. While never becoming fully social democratic, American unions have shared in the crises of social democratic parties. Perhaps they might also share in solutions to those problems.

Prezowski emphasized that the working class in industrialized democracies had never been large enough for social democratic parties to achieve a majority on its votes alone.¹¹ Labor movements had needed a coalition with friendly interests in order to succeed even in countries such as Sweden that we think of as exemplars of success. More recently, Kitschelt has argued that the social democratic parties that have survived the challenges of the late twentieth century did so by building on a libertarian community dimension ("the capacity of individuals and voluntary groups to organize interest associations and to participate in policy making processes") to the traditional emphasis on social solidarity and equality. This communitarian concern requires a willingness to foster and work with organizations and movements outside the labor movement. Kitschelt can thus be read as further endorsing the argument of Prezowski that labor movements need to work in coalitions.¹²

The American labor movement has in fact long worked in coalitions. At the height of the labor/liberal alliance in the 1960s, the AFL-CIO and individual unions worked in collaboration with similarly liberal groups; unions also worked to foster the creation and growth of public interest groups promoting civil rights, consumer protection and the interests of the elderly. One of the difficulties that unions made for themselves in

¹¹ Adam Prezowski, *Capitalism and Social Democracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

¹² Hebert Kitschelt, *The Transformation of European Social Democracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p 298.

the 1960s and 1970s was the disruption of natural alliances with liberal groups. The Vietnam War, conflict over the environment and tensions resulting from disagreements over the impact of affirmative action programs on traditional union practices such as seniority reduced the ability of unions to work in coalitions.

The severity of the crisis confronting unions has made them realize the need to change this situation. Fortunately for unions, changing ideological and political tides have created renewed opportunities for coalition politics. American unions became steadily more protectionist in the later decades of the twentieth century. It is almost startling to recall that as recently as the 1960s, industrial unions including the Steelworkers and UAW supported trade liberalization as long as displaced workers received help and retraining. Union support for trade liberalization has disappeared to be replaced with fervent opposition to policies such as NAFTA or Congressional adoption of “fast track” procedures designed to secure a speedy “up or down” vote on trade agreements without amendments. This attitude can be seen as a very natural expression of self interest. American workers are very highly paid by international standards and are therefore vulnerable to international competition. Admittedly this vulnerability is limited by a number of factors. In recent years, unions have attempted to reverse their decline by forming coalitions. American workers also have very high productivity rates by international standards and their employers face much lower additional costs of employment (such as taxes on employment) compared to their rivals in countries such as France. However, in the era of globalization, innovations in production techniques are diffused internationally with rapidity and competition comes not only from the welfare states with high employment taxes but also from low cost countries in the third world. While advocates of “comparative advantage” might argue that the long term interest of workers is advanced by free trade even if there are short term job losses, it is hard to deny that the short term interest of workers and their unions is served by opposing further trade liberalization.

The determination of unions to restrict opportunities of countries, including the poorest countries, to export to the United States would once have been interpreted as further evidence of their decline from a reforming social movement into mere interest groups. However, the vast majority of environmental groups have joined unions in their antipathy to trade liberalization. As the “Battle in Seattle” and subsequent battles in Washington DC and Turin demonstrated, the social movement left is also fervently opposed to trade liberalization. Concern that “world government” threatens (and probably remains) a preoccupation of the American far right. It also now a concern of the far left. Globalization, it is argued, threatens to eviscerate hard won regulations to protect the environment; a “race to the bottom” is said to be an imminent danger even though empirical evidence to warrant such a fear is lacking. There are a few examples of international organizations ruling that US environmental regulations breach trade agreements. A GATT (General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade) disputes body ruled that the Marine Mammal Protection Act designed to save dolphins from tuna fishermen was unacceptable; a WTO panel made a similar determination in a case concerning the use of the US Endangered Species Act to block importing shrimp from countries that did not require the use of Turtle Exclusion Devices (TEDs) by their fishermen. These examples although relatively few and limited in their impact have made environmentalists allies of the labor unions in their campaigns against “fast track.”

The coalition against trade liberalization has several advantages for the unions. It brings them out of the ghetto that they had created for themselves in the 1960s and 1970s. It brings them potential assistance from groups that are strong among social groups (white collar, professional class workers) among whom unions are weak. Could this alliance be a modern equivalent to the labor/liberal alliance of the 1960s?

There are several reasons to doubt that this alliance will be to the long term advantage of unions. First, while environmentalists may work to impose labor standards on exporters to the United States from the third world, it is unlikely that they will assist unions with their most pressing problem, the need to revise labor laws to make it easier to recruit and organize members. Second, the anti trade coalition generally loses. Although the unions and environmentalists were able to block “fast track” in the last years of the Clinton Administration, they were unable to prevent approval of NAFTA and the Uruguay Round creating the WTO in the mid 1990s, permanent “most favored nation” trade status for China in the last year of the Clinton presidency and, most recently, fast track authority for President Bush in 2002. The opportunities for coalitions with liberals that trade has provided the unions have brought them from their ghetto and made them respectable again in liberal circles. They do not offer a permanent solution to unions’ problems. Unions themselves recognize that other alliances are needed. The Service Employees International has forged alliances with consumer groups to try to protect patients’ rights as well as workers’ interests in health care.¹³ In 1996, an umbrella organization, the Campaign for America’s Future, was founded to link liberal activists and organized labor. The group’s objectives were to unite labor, women’s groups, civil rights organizations, environmental and consumer groups.¹⁴

The repeated successes of the Republicans have created difficult times for liberals in the unions and more generally. At least, however, unions have been finding ways to escape the ghetto in which they had helped to place themselves.

Conclusion

American unions have been in the shadow of social democracy in two senses. First, they have been shadows of the model of close union/social democratic party relations that we assume to exist in most advanced industrialized countries. Second, this relationship itself has fallen under the shadows that have affected many labor movements such as declining membership, the difficulty of working out a *modus vivendi* with the new left and the need of social democratic parties to secure the support of the generally growing proportion of the electorate that is not unionized. Political scientists have stressed the need for unions to form coalitions if they are to succeed in escaping these shadows. American unions have themselves long been part of coalition politics but more recently have shown an increased awareness of the importance of working in coalition with liberal groups. Whether the coalitions that they have formed will enable unions to escape from the shadows that have fallen on labor movements more generally remains to be seen but may be doubted.

¹³ Julie Kosterlitz, “Stern Measures,” *National Journal* 22 June 1996, p 1365.

¹⁴ Julie Kosterlitz, “Reconciliation on the Left,” *National Journal*, 3 August 1996, p 1668.