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Big Labor Regains its Muscle: Social Responsibility Leads to Greater Political Clout

Abstract

[Excerpt] The political fortunes of organized labor have improved remarkably in the past two years. Following a decade of disappointments in Congress and at the polls, the AFL-CIO has successfully orchestrated a return to its position as one of the premier lobbying powers in Washington. The recently concluded 100th Congress was marked by a series of major victories, including plant closing protection, strict limits on the use of polygraph tests to screen employees, omnibus trade legislation, and a successful override of President Reagan's veto of funding for highway construction. The defeat of AFL-CIO-endorsed presidential candidate Michael Dukakis notwithstanding, the 1988 election results should serve to further augment labor's influence.

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Big Labor Regains Its Muscle: Social responsibility leads to greater political clout

Richard W. Hurd
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The political fortunes of organized labor have improved remarkably in the past two years. Following a decade of disappointments in Congress and at the polls, the AFL-CIO has successfully orchestrated a return to its position as one of the premier lobbying powers in Washington. The recently concluded 100th Congress was marked by a series of major victories, including plant closing protection, strict limits on the use of polygraph tests to screen employees, omnibus trade legislation, and a successful override of President Reagan's veto of funding for highway construction. The defeat of AFL-CIO-endorsed presidential candidate Michael Dukakis notwithstanding, the 1988 election results should serve to further augment labor's influence.

This turn of events is exceptional given the widely reported decline in union membership and the attendant loss of power in the economic area. Unions in the United States have suffered through a decade replete with humbling adversity-concessionary bargaining, an inability to sufficiently organize new members in the booming service sector to offset employment declines in unionized manufacturing industries, and blatant union busting in the private sector by firms like Continental Airlines and International Paper, which have efficiently emulated President Reagan's destruction of PATCO. The hard times have forced labor leaders to engage in a serious reevaluation of their strategy and the role of their movement in our society.

Out of this process has come a renewed commitment to political action which transcends the petty differences among unions that have in the past so frequently undermined labor's efforts in this realm. The change has been reflected in better organization and coordination of both lobbying activities and campaign support for pro-union candidates. At least as important has been a subtle but significant shift in legislative priorities. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, most of the labor agenda could be neatly divided into two categories: general social legislation and special interest legislation. The former category included civil rights, social security, and job training programs which were supported by a coalition of liberal pressure groups. The latter category included union-specific proposals such as labor law reform and prevailing wage requirements for federally funded projects.

From 1981 to 1986 lobbyists were on the defensive and divided their time between trying to preserve special interest labor laws and fighting to prevent the dismantling of welfare programs and civil rights regulations. When the Democratic Party regained control of the Senate in the 1986 elections, the AFL-CIO seized on the opportunity to unveil its new legislative strategy. Attention was focused on bills that addressed the job related concerns of a broad spectrum of workers. By taking the initiative on issues such as plant closing protection, parental leave, and mandated health insurance, organized labor has begun to erase its image as a special interest group concerned more with the agenda of labor bosses than with the problems of average working men and women. In the process, the effectiveness of the labor lobby has increased dramatically, reflecting congressional concurrence with the values inherent in the proposed legislation. In short, organized labor's recent success is directly related to the increased social responsibility of its political initiatives.

LABOR'S POLITICAL MACHINE FALTERS

The political efforts of organized labor are coordinated by the AFL-CIO, the major federation to which most national unions belong. Although all of the large national unions employ lobbyists to look after their own particular interests in Congress, most of them work closely with the AFL-CIO Legislative Department. A second AFL-CIO department, the Committee on Political Education! (COPE), compiles the records of members of Congress on key votes reflecting labor's legislative priorities.* These "COPE scores" are widely disseminated within the labor movement and serve as the basis for endorsement decisions in congressional races. Although most of the endorsements go to Democrats, there are typically a dozen or so moderate Republicans who win labor's backing. In addition to educating union members about endorsements and congressional voting records, COPE also arranges for in-kind campaign services including volunteers, phone banks, and assignment of union staff to assist candidates supported by the AFJL-CIO.

"The influence of labor's machine reached an apex in the 1976 elections when 71 percent of COPE-endorsed candidates won seats in Congress. . . ."

Monetary campaign aid comes from political action committees (PACs) representing approximately eighty different national unions. Under federal law, labor PACs can raise funds only through voluntary donations from union members. To assist labor PACs in their allocation decisions, COPE provides information concerning which labor-endorsed candidates are in the best position to benefit from PAC contributions.

The influence of labor's political machine reached an apex in the 1976 elections when 71 percent of COPE endorsed candidates won seats in Congress and labor backed Democrat Jimmy Carter was also victorious. However, the electoral win did not translate into legislative success, as the AFL-CIO had anticipated. In fact, COPE scores in the Ninety-fifth Congress (1977—1978) actually fell slightly compared to those in the Ninety-fourth Congress. The second session of the Ninety-fifth Congress was particularly disappointing, with labor losing votes on half of the key bills supported by COPE, the worst showing in years.

Symptomatic of the 1978 difficulties was a stinging defeat handed to the AFL-CIO's number one priority, labor law reform. Although the bill that was eventually rejected was relatively modest, speeding up National Labor Relations Board procedures in union representation elections and increasing penalties for labor law violators, the AFL-CIO's original proposal was much more extensive. A provision that would have resulted in many instances in the recognition of a union without a vote by workers attracted strong opposition from business organizations, including the U.S. Chamber of Commerce and the National Association of Manufacturers. A proposal that would have set aside state laws banning union shop agreements raised the ire of representatives from right-to-work states, most of which are in the South. Although the bill was eventually shorn of these more objectionable sections, the die had been cast.

By pushing originally for sweeping changes in labor law, the AFL-CIO appeared greedy and attracted attention to its role as chief lobbyist for the special interests of trade unions. In the process, it alienated many of its marginal supporters in Congress, most notably southern Democrats. Subsequently, a coalition between these conservative Democrats and the Republican Party became a major impediment to labor's legislative agenda. After only modest success in the Ninety-sixth Congress, the election of Ronald Reagan and a Republican Senate in 1980 ushered in six years of defensive lobbying activity during which no significant new proposals from organized labor saw the light of day.

In the early 1980s, labor's declining fortunes in the political arena were magnified by membership losses and diminished economic influence. Reacting to this abysmal predicament, the leaders of the AFL-CIO decided that the only way to rectify the situation was to remove Reagan from the

White House.

They subsequently staged an exhaustive campaign to win the 1984 Democratic Party presidential nomination for their longtime ally, Walter Mondale. This strategy eventually backfired as Mondale was saddled with the special interest candidate label, and his landslide loss in the general election was widely interpreted as a repudiation of organized labor. Especially embarrassing were exit polls which showed that 45 percent of union members had ignored their leaders and voted for Reagan.

A dramatic restructuring of labor's approach was required. In February 1985, a soul-searching self-criticism was released by the AFL-CIO, titled "The Changing Situation of Workers and Their Unions." The report was prepared by the AFL-CIO Committee on the Evolution of Work, under the direction of Secretary-Treasurer Tom Donahue. Its conclusions were based on a year of study, which included consultation with many academic labor relations experts, and extensive polling of union and nonunion workers by Louis Harris and Associates.

THE AFL-CIO REGROUPS

The message was clear. Union and nonunion workers alike were skeptical of a labor movement grown top heavy with a bureaucracy whose leaders were out of touch with the rank and file. Many specific changes were suggested, ranging from improved organizing tactics to better public relations. Two broad themes provided the basis for the detailed recommendations: (1) the AFL-CIO and its member unions needed to modernize their techniques so that their services could be delivered more efficiently, and (2) to regain the trust of workers, leaders of the national unions and the AFL-CIO would have to reach out to them and address their real concerns. In regard to the latter point, the report emphasized that attention to all workers, including those not currently covered by collective bargaining agreements, would be essential if the labor movement were to change its image and recapture its vitality.

"Attention was focused on bills that addressed the job-related concerns of a broad spectrum of workers."

In accordance with the 1985 evolution-of-work report, the political machinery of the AFL-CIO was fine-tuned. In order to better fulfill its educational mission, COPE prepared computerized mailing and phone lists of all AFL-CIO members organized by congressional district. These lists would eventually be used not only during elections but also to coordinate timely constituent letter, call-in, postcard, and mailgram campaigns in support of labor's position on key votes in Congress. Legislative action committees were established in selected districts whose representatives were identified as "swing voters" on labor issues. Coordination of PAC contributions was improved as House and Senate Marginal Committees refined COPE's analysis of the election prospects of endorsed candidates. In order to earn a spot on the COPE Marginal List (which became increasingly influential in labor PAC campaign contributions), a candidate would have to demonstrate both voter appeal (based on past elections or polling data) and the ability to raise sufficient funds from nonlabor sources to wage a credible campaign.

On the lobbying front, style and substance were modified. The old approach of starting with an ideal wish list and negotiating with Congress to achieve as much as possible was discarded. In its place, AFL-CIO lobbyists sought to develop a calm, working relationship with congressional leaders to assure that legislation was moving in a positive direction from labor's perspective. Although this new attitude transcended personalities, it was embodied in the selection of Robert McGlotten as AFL-CIO legislative director. Appointed to the post in 1986 at the age of 47, McGlotten was a representative for the Transport Workers Union before joining the AFL-CIO staff in 1967. As a black who has held a leadership role in a number of civil rights organizations, McGlotten's connections with allied lobby groups and liberal members of Congress were established. More important, he had also demonstrated his ability to

work amicably with moderates during a two year stint as special assistant to the Secretary of Labor during the Nixon administration.

The substance of labor's program was also altered, with a new agenda that gave priority to labor legislation that would benefit all workers. The spirit of this new approach was captured by Secretary-Treasurer Tom Donahue: "There is no labor legislation agenda apart from other segments of our society. We have....legislative initiatives which incorporate our...hopes for better jobs, for education, for housing and health care, and we will follow our belief that workers and their children ought not to be priced out of any of those matters." Determined to shed the special interest label, the AFL-CIO was ready to implement its new strategy when the Democrats regained control of the Senate starting with the 1987 session of Congress.

The refinement of labor's political machine paid off in the 1986 elections, as unions played a key role restoring the Democratic Party to majority status in the Senate. Although they now controlled both Houses of Congress, the Democrats had not coalesced around a coherent plan of action. They had been put on the defensive by the popularity of the Reagan revolution and were reluctant to pursue renewed funding for the social programs that had been the party's legacy since the New Deal but: which were saddled with the now derisive "liberal" label.

A NEW AGENDA

The AFL-CIO was prepared to fill the void with an agenda that would restructure the national debate. A decade of labor market instability had left the typical worker reeling—high-wage jobs in heavy industry had been replaced by lower-wage jobs in high-tech and the service sector, many companies had reduced employee benefits because of escalating insurance premiums, import competition and corporate restructuring had reduced job security, and most families now required income from both parents, raising new concerns for child care issues. The AFL-CIO legislative program reflected a philosophy of economic populism designed to appeal to the job-related concerns of ordinary working families.

For most of the 100th Congress, legislative deliberations centered on proposals emanating from the AFL-CIO. Labor's role and effectiveness were highlighted in the summer of 1988 in a direct confrontation with President Reagan. The President vetoed an omnibus trade bill primarily because it included a controversial plant closing provision. The objectionable section, a top priority of labor, called for sixty days' advance notification before a layoff or plant closing involving fifty or more workers. With public opinion polls showing 80 percent popular support for the measure, Congress separated it from the trade legislation and sent a freestanding plant closing bill to the White House. Rather than invite a certain override and give the Democrats a campaign issue, the President allowed it to become law without his signature.

The omnibus trade bill, which required retaliation against unfair practices of U.S. trading partners, was subsequently passed again and signed by the President. Also strongly supported by the AFL-CIO, this law represents a departure from many of labor's prior initiatives because it applies to imports across the board rather than offering protection only for specific unionized industries such as steel or autos.

Many of labor's other agenda items had similar broad-based appeal. In March 1988, a law was enacted which bans most uses of polygraph tests by private sector firms, including explicit prohibitions on pre-employment screening and random testing to detect possible employee theft. A parental leave measure would have required employers to grant up to ten weeks of unpaid leave to parents to care for newborn, adopted, or seriously ill children. A mandated benefits proposal would have required employers to offer basic health insurance coverage to all workers. A high-risk notification bill would have required businesses to notify and educate employees regarding toxic substances in the workplace.

Although none of the latter three measures passed both Houses in the 100th Congress, they

will undoubtedly be reintroduced next year—with parental leave standing the best chance of early enactment. For the most part, the AFL-CIO avoided new spending programs, but there were two notable exceptions. Early in 1987, labor helped engineer the override of a veto of an \$88 billion highway construction bill, which created 700,000 jobs for both union and nonunion workers. In the summer of 1988, labor united with its old allies from various liberal pressure groups to successfully expand Medicare coverage by adding catastrophic health insurance. The AFL-CIO also joined its allies in two other triumphs: repudiation of the Bork nomination to the Supreme Court and the override of President Reagan's veto of the Civil Rights Restoration Act.

Although there were also defeats along the way, most notably to the few pieces of special interest labor legislation that the AFL-CIO quietly pursued, the 100th Congress can only be viewed as an overwhelming success. Ratings by COPE were the highest achieved in the past two decades. The gains were especially dramatic in the Senate, with the average COPE score increasing from 45 percent in 1986 to over 60 percent in each of the succeeding two years. Although this resulted in part from the election of several new Democratic senators, the change in labor's program was even more important.

Restricting the comparison to holdover senators who had served in the Ninety-ninth Congress, the average COPE score increased from 47 percent in 1986 to 64 percent in 1987. The change was even more dramatic among the holdover Senators from the thirteen southern states, whose average score improved from 36 percent in 1986 to 62 percent in 1987. By focusing on populist economic issues that would appeal to a broad cross section of the working public, the AFL-CIO was able to overcome the resistance of Democrats from the South who had for years been reluctant to vote for bills associated with northern labor bosses.

THE 1988 ELECTION AND BEYOND

Having learned from the Mondale debacle in 1984, organized labor adopted a low profile in the 1988 presidential election. Rather than endorse a candidate in the primaries, the AFL-CIO encouraged rank-and-file members to run as delegates to the Democratic convention on the slate of the candidate of their choice. All major candidates for the nomination, including Republicans, were given the opportunity to present their views to unionists through position papers and a videotape widely distributed throughout the labor movement. This approach successfully insulated the AFL-CIO from charges of bias, and the 1984 image of labor bosses pursuing their own political objectives regardless of the wishes of union members was avoided.

Most unions eventually endorsed Michael Dukakis, and his defeat was a disappointment. However, the Democratic ticket did garner strong support from union members, winning 69 percent of their votes. More important, 67 percent of COPE-endorsed candidates for Congress won, the best showing since 1976. The AFL-CIO's carefully orchestrated support for these candidates (including 500,000 union volunteers assisting on election day) was undoubtedly instrumental in the unusual outcome of the election, with the Democratic Party increasing its majority in both Houses of Congress in spite of a clear-cut Republican victory in the presidential campaign.

Organized labor is in a position to continue its legislative success story as long as it sticks to its current course. A low-key approach emphasizing a nonconfrontational working relationship with members of Congress is least likely to stir up resentment from crucial swing voters. The recent election should help, since it underscored the validity of an observation made by Mark de-Bernardo of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce in an interview last summer: "Labor does a better job than management of identifying and rewarding friends in Congress."

Although there is little hope in the short run for major special interest victories such as labor law reform, the AFL-CIO can continue to influence the legislative process in the interest of working people by working for proposals like parental leave and mandated health benefits.

In the process, the labor movement stands to reap rewards in the form of goodwill and an

improved public image. The increased social responsibility demonstrated by labor in the political arena has provided the foundation for its renewed influence.