STUDY

The State of the American Unions

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- After decades during which their numerical strength has slowly but steadily declined, U.S. trade unions are now facing an unprecedented assault from a radicalized Republican right. Legislation is advancing to strip collective bargaining rights or membership from unions.

- The fiscal crisis of the states has enabled Republicans to campaign against the pay and benefits accorded public sector workers. As adequate health insurance benefits and defined benefit pensions have become scarce in the de-unionized private sector, unionized public sector workers have largely been able to retain them, creating political opening for Republicans to target »overpaid« teachers, police officers, fire fighters, nurses – though Republicans prefer to call them all »bureaucrats«.

- Statistics show that the period of high-levels of unionization in America – the 30 years after World War II – was the one period of broadly shared prosperity in American economic history. Meanwhile, the evisceration of the American middle class – the decently-paid part of its working class in particular – has finally become an agreed-to fact among America's chattering classes. In the America where Wal-Mart was the largest employer, the non-union retailer pays its employees so little that they are compelled to shop at Wal-Mart.

- However, American unions still represent about 16 million workers. Amongst others they thus remain a major force in voter-registration, education and mobilization, particularly within the Latino community, the one Democratic constituency whose rapid growth could ensure an enduring Democratic majority in American politics.

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1. Into the Valley of Death

American labor unions today are busier than they've been in years. Unfortunately, virtually every fight they're waging is defensive.

After decades during which their numerical strength has slowly but steadily declined, U.S. trade unions are now facing an unprecedented assault from a radicalized Republican right, both in Congress and in the many statehouses where Republicans took control in the 2010 elections. In states long thought to be bastions of union strength, or at least of widespread acceptance of unions' legitimacy, legislation is advancing to strip collective bargaining rights or membership from unions. In the Republican-controlled U.S. House of Representatives, the Republican majority has refused to approve President Obama's nominees to the National Labor Relations Board, which administers the nation's labor laws and oversees union representation elections. Prominent Republicans, including Texas Governor Rick Perry, have even called for abolishing the NLRB altogether.

This assault on unions, unparalleled in its breadth and intensity than any since the late 19th-century, comes at a time when unions are weaker than at any time since the depths of the Great Depression in the early 1930s, before Franklin Roosevelt came to power. According to the annual report of the Bureau of Labor Statistics, which came out in late January, just 11.8 percent of American workers belong to unions – a continuation of the slow descent that began in the mid-1950s, when unionized workers constituted roughly 35 percent of the work force. A scant 6.9 percent of American workers employed in the private sector are unionized, while the level of unionization in the public sector is a distinctly more robust 37 percent. Last year, for the first time ever, the actual number of unionized public sector workers exceeded the number of unionized private sector workers.

At a time when the level of economic inequality in America has become a primary issue in the nation's political discourse, in part due to the totally unanticipated success of Occupy Wall Street in changing the nation's discussion, the decline of private sector unions is not yet widely acknowledged as a leading factor in inequality's rise. This stunning omission is further and sad confirmation of unions' decline: Many commentators seem to have altogether stopped thinking about the role that unions play in creating more broadly shared prosperity. Most of the discussion and proposals coming from liberals on how to re-create a more equitable economy focus on making the tax code more progressive and improving education. Unions have gone missing from the bulk of this discussion, the clear connection between union density and power on the one hand and a more equitable distribution of wealth on the other to the contrary notwithstanding.

With the rate of private sector unionization so low, and with much of the private sector membership still concentrated in manufacturing industries subject to global competition, the pay and benefits that these unions secure in their contracts have been sharply reduced. While longtime unionized auto workers still make roughly $ 29 an hour with defined benefit pensions, new unionized hires now make roughly $ 14 an hour with defined contribution pensions, and are locked into agreements that stipulate their pay cannot rise above $ 19 an hour no matter how long they work at their company. The union pay and benefit advantage over its domestic non-union competition – chiefly, the foreign-owned auto plants in the non-union South – has all but vanished, contributing further to the rise in American economic inequality.

With the rate of unionization so low, why the current rightwing assault on unions? Why beat a sickly, if not dead, horse? The answer is three-fold: First, unions still fund and mount potent election campaigns on behalf of Democratic candidates, and now that Republicans have come to power in many states, they are moving to weaken unions as a way to weaken their Democratic opponents. Second, the fiscal crisis of the states engendered by the Great Recession has enabled Republicans to campaign against the pay and benefits accorded public sector workers. As adequate health insurance benefits and defined benefit pensions have become scarce in the de-unionized private sector, unionized public sector workers have largely been able to retain them, creating an political opening for Republicans to target »overpaid« teachers, police officers, fire fighters, nurses – though Republicans prefer to call them all »bureaucrats«. Beyond reducing pay and benefits, however, Republicans have gone further, and in state after state proposed stripping public employees of collective bargaining rights altogether. In several key states, they've succeeded in doing so. In short, the fiscal crisis has provided the pretext for diminishing union power, and thus – see answer one, above – diminishing the electoral clout of their Democratic rivals.

Third, the vast majority of American private sector employers – from the benighted Wal-Mart heirs in backward Arkansas to the enlightened sophisticates of Silicon Valley – are adamantly opposed to unions. They have grown accustomed, moreover, to extracting greater profits by suppressing wages, as a study from J.P. Morgan Chase's investment unit – not exactly a bastion of Marxist thinking – has demonstrated. Thus the war on unions rolls on – indeed, has escalated over the past year.

Does this war have popular support? The early indications are that it doesn't. When rightwing Republicans took control of the Ohio state legislature in early 2011, with equally rightwing Republican John Kasich becoming governor, they teamed up to enact legislation that would have stripped all public employees of both the state and Ohio's municipalities, of collective bargaining rights. But the Ohio constitution allows for popular referendums to repeal legislation, and late last year, Ohio voters flocked to the polls and did indeed repeal the new law by nearly a two-to-one majority. Polling suggests that unions still command majority support from the American people, though that support declined several years ago from a higher level.

But majority support or no, unions continue to find the procedural hurdles to organizing so daunting that they have all but given it up. Indeed, there is less organizing going on today than at any time in many decades. Unions are moving heaven and earth to fight back against the attacks being mounted against them in state after state, and in the House of Representatives, but even the unions most identified with organizing during the past several decades, most prominently the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) seem to have largely abandoned their efforts.

It is, in short, a very grim time for American unions.

2. The Institutional and Legal Context

Before 1935, American unions existed in a quasi-legal limbo. At the level of the (then 48) states, unions were afforded some legal protections in some states and effectively all but banned in others. With the coming of Franklin Roosevelt and the New Deal, however, that changed. The National Labor Relations Act (NLRA – authored by New York Senator Robert Wagner, who also authored the legislation establishing the Social Security system), enacted in 1935, specifically stated in its preamble that unions were beneficial to the economy by increasing the purchasing power of the average American – Keynesianism *avant la letter*. It gave private sector workers the legal right to organize anywhere in the U. S. and created a five-member National Labor Relations Board to create the rules for organizing and union recognition, and to monitor and sanction employers and unions who violated those rules.

The right to unionize stipulated in the act did not extend to all workers. Excluded were public employees and farm workers (the latter at the insistence of Southern senators and congressmen who opposed granting such rights to the African-American field workers of the South). The question of whether farm workers or public employees could legally organize therefore devolved to the individual states. In 1975, California's newly elected Democratic Governor Jerry Brown (now governor again) and the Democratic legislature extended organizing rights to the state's farm workers – California being the center of America's agribusiness industry and home to Cesar Chavez's United Farm Workers, whose strikes and boycotts had persuaded some growers to sign contracts with them, but for whom no mandatory election-representation process had been guaranteed by law.

In the late 1950s, Wisconsin became the first state to extend collective bargaining rights to public employees, followed in the early 1960s by New York state. (Both states had experienced a rise of teacher activism in the years preceding the enactment of these laws.) In 1962, President John F. Kennedy, through executive order, allowed for the establishment of unions of federal workers, though those unions still cannot bargain over pay and benefits. In the 1960s and '70s, then, there was a great surge of organizing of public workers, led by the American Federation of Teachers under Al Shanker and the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) under Jerry Wurf. (It was while helping an AFSCME-backed strike of Memphis sanitation workers that Martin Luther King, Jr., was murdered.)

Because the legalization of collective bargaining for public employees was left to the states, the profound regional differences within the United States produced profoundly different outcomes. The states in which private-sector unions were thriving – chiefly, those of the Northeast, the industrial Midwest and the Pacific coast – granted collective bargaining rights to public employees. The more conservative states of the racially polarized South and the Mountain West did not.

While unions in the 1930s, after the passage of the NLRA, had considerable success in organizing private-sector workers in the industrial Midwest and on the two coasts, their attempts to organize in the segregated South failed during their two great organizing drives (1938 and 1946). Following a major wave of union militance in the unionized north in 1946, as workers sought to make up the ground they'd lost during World War II, a conservative U.S. Congress enacted the Tart-Hartley Act (over President Truman's veto), changing the NLRA to enable states to pass »right-to-work« legislation enabling workers covered by private-sector union contracts to opt out of union membership and paying union dues. Twenty-one states, all either in the South or the Mountain West, availed themselves of this opportunity.

From the 1950s on, then, private-sector unionization rates outside the South and Mountain West have been significantly higher than those in those two regions. Similarly, those two regions are the ones in which public sector workers have not been legally able to organize or strike. As a result, by the time of the completion of large-scale public-sector organizing in the 1980s, America could be said to have two separate economies – a substantially unionized one in the North, a substantially non-union (and lower-income) one in the South.

But America has never finished fighting its civil war between North and South, between two rival economic systems. And since 1980, the South has clearly been winning.

3. The Triumph of the Anti-Union South

When Ronald Reagan won the White House (and Republicans the U.S. Senate) in the 1980 election, it was a new breed of Republicans that were coming to power. First and foremost, it was rooted in the South. For 100 years after the end of the Civil War, the South had been Democratic – segregationist, but Democratic – in a century-long reaction to the fact that the Republican Lincoln had waged and won the Civil War and abolished slavery. With Lyndon Johnson's signing both the Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act into law in 1964 and 1965, respectively, the South began to turn Republican, and Reagan carried a record number of Southern states on a platform of states' rights and economic libertarianism.

Second, unlike previous Republican presidents, Reagan was a product of the Sunbelt and surrounded himself with Sunbelt (that is, Southern and Western) capitalists who were fiercely antagonistic to unions. When the union of federally-employed air traffic controllers (which had endorsed Reagan) struck for better working conditions in 1981, Reagan broke their strike, and employers across the nation took this as a signal that it was open season on unions.

Increasingly, companies based in the unionized north began to open plants in the non-union South. This proved to be just a prelude to the offshoring of production that U.S. multinational corporations began during the 1980s, and expanded greatly after Congress voted to extend permanent normalized trade relations to China in 2000. Over this same 30-year period, an anti-union consulting industry arose to help employers exploit the weaknesses in the NLRA to thwart union organizing. In short order, employers discovered they could delay union elections for long periods of time, discharge union activists and only have to pay nominal fines for doing so (one survey found that this happened in 40 percent of organizing campaigns), and call workers into one-on-one meetings with managers who asked them how they planned to vote on unionization. Employers also discovered that even after workers had voted to unionize and the NLRB had certified the union, there was no real penalty for refusing to agree to a contract.

The unions more oriented to organizing – there were roughly seven or eight big unions still organizing out of a total of about 60 in the year 2000 – sought to avoid NLRB-certified elections altogether, so weak were the protections afforded by the law. The annual number of union elections declined by about 80 percent from 1970 to 2010. At times, unions sought to win recognition through »card check« – having a majority of workers sign union-affiliation cards and, putting pressure on both the employer's financial backers and on the communities in which the work place was located, compelling the employer to sign a contract. But card check only worked occasionally, usually after arduous »corporate campaigns« enlisting the help of union and governmental allies abroad, Wall Street consultants, elected officials, clergy, and any available deities.

Meanwhile, more and more American business relocated to the South. And as American manufacturing grew smaller, the unionized General Motors Corporation – America's largest private-sector employer from the 1930s through the 1990s – was supplanted as the nation's largest employer by Wal-Mart, a ferociously anti-union chain retailer that responded to the one successful attempt of its workers to organize (they were meat cutters in a single store in Texas) by announcing it was forever closing down the sale of fresh meat in every one of its stores. With its growing and commanding share of the American retail market, Wal-Mart demanded low costs and low wages from all its suppliers, causing a chain reaction of declining incomes and employer union opposition across the American economy (as well as being a major factor in the shift of production from the U.S. to China).

It was not only American corporations that were moving into the South. European manufacturers such as Mercedes and Volkswagen opened plants in the South as well, receiving a higher profit margin from these non-union, low-wage factories. The trend has become so pervasive that the Boston Consulting Group released a study last year arguing that European manufacturers are increasingly viewing America as a place to go for low-wage labor in a politically less volatile and risky land than those of East Asia.

The Fordist economy of 20th-century America has been undone. In the America where GM was the largest employer, unionized auto manufacturers paid their workers enough so they could afford to buy the manufacturers' cars. In the America where Wal-Mart was the largest employer, the non-union retailer pays its employees so little that they are compelled to shop at WalMart.

The evisceration of the American middle class – the decently-paid part of its working class in particular – has finally become an agreed-to fact among America's chattering classes. New statistics come out seemingly every week documenting the growing economic inequality in the nation – most prominently, the October 2011 report of the Congressional Budget Office documenting that the share of income going to the top quintile between 1979 and today increased at the expense of every other quintile.

What the statistics also document is that the period of high-levels of unionization in America – the 30 years after World War II – was the one period of broadly shared prosperity in American economic history. From 1947 through 1973, productivity in America rose by 102 percent and median household income rose exactly in tandem – that is, also by 102 percent. Thereafter, productivity continued to rise but median incomes did not. Indeed, median incomes have stagnated since 1979, while the incomes of the wealthiest one percent of Americans have increased by more than 300 percent.

Over the past decade, declining unionization and rising inequality have both been on the rise. The »recovery« of 2002–2007 was the only one in American economic history during which median income declined, as businesses accelerated their offshoring: Over the past decade, more than 55,000 American factories have closed their doors. Increases in productivity have taken their toll as well (it now takes two steelworkers to make what it took ten steelworkers to make 20 years ago), but so have the Chinese government's subsidies to its export industries and its low evaluation of its currency. In consequence, employment in higher paying manufacturing industries declined, and the pressure to lower wages grew.

In consequence, U.S. labor compensation as a share of company revenues and of the nation's GDP is now at its lowest level since the Commerce Department began measuring it in the late 1940s. According to Michael Cembalest, the chief investment officer of J.P. Morgan Chase, in his newsletter to the bank's major investors, »reductions in wages and benefits« were responsible for about 75 percent of the increase in corporate profits between 2000 and 2007.

Unions have sought to combat these changes legislatively. On four occasions when the Democrats controlled both the White House and Congress – 1965, 1979, 1994 and 2009 – unions hoped to better their organizing prospects through changes to the NLRA that made it more onerous for employers to violate the terms of the act and subvert its spirit. Each time, however, the unions failed, encountering not only Republican opposition but opposition from Democrats who represented largely non-union states. The failure of the Senate to enact the Employee Free Choice Act (EFCA) in 2009–10 (a failure due in part to opposition from Democratic senators from Arkansas, a largely non-union state dominated by Wal-Mart, which is headquartered there) left unions confronting a brick wall. Since the failure of EFCA, almost no unions have been engaging in private-sector organizing – even SEIU, which organized roughly 200,000 janitors who work in the office buildings of America's downtowns over the past quarter-century. The only exceptions are the several unions – the Teamsters, the Communications Workers and the airline unions – that are campaigning to organize workers in the airline industry since an Obama-administration ruling has made organizing easier in this sector. (Transportation workers are covered not under the NLRA but the Railway Labor Act, which had required as a condition of union recognition the votes of a majority of all the employees of a company – not just a majority of those voting. Obama's Railway Labor Board changed the rule to one requiring just a majority of the voters.)

Under its dynamic new president, Bob King, the UAW had announced it would endeavor once again to organize some Southern auto plants owned by European companies. But compelled to accept contracts with rates of pay for its newer hires reduced to the pay rates in those Southern, non-union plants ($ 14 an hour), the appeal of the UAW to these Southern workers isn't likely to be very strong. As well, the AFL-CIO has taken under its wing a quasi-union of New York City taxi drivers, and is embracing other not-quite-union organizations even as its established unions have largely abandoned the organizing field. The Change To Win Federation – the organization of unions (chiefly, SEIU, the Teamsters and the United Food and Commercial Workers) that broke away from the AFL-CIO in 2005 to devote more of its resources to organizing has failed to see any of its brilliant, innovative and at times global campaigns actually result in even one union contract after six-and-a-half years. Both Change To Win and the AFL-CIO have settled unhappily into a period of organizing inertia. They remain important chiefly insofar as their member unions still represent about 16 million workers, and as they are major voter-registration, education and mobilization organizations, particularly within the Latino community, the one Democratic constituency whose rapid growth could ensure an enduring Democratic majority in American politics.

4. Going Public

Over the past 30 years, confronted with the growing near-impossibility of expanding in the private sector, many once-exclusively-private-sector unions have turned to organizing such public-sector workers as university employees and nurses. The United Auto Workers, for instance, which had 1.9 million members in 1979, today has fewer than 400,000 – and only about 125.000 are actually auto workers. The union also claims as members employees at the Universities of Michigan and California, and had claimed free-lance writers in New York.

As a rule, the elected governments in the unionized regions of America had not opposed unionization in the way that private-sector employers had, in part because, unlike private-sector employers, they had to come before the voters. According to research by Cornell University professor Kate Bronfenbrenner, it's chiefly this disparity in employer opposition that accounts for the disparity between private- and public-sector unionization rates.

But in the 2010 elections, benefiting from the widespread discontent with the economy and the apparent inability of the Obama Administration to do anything about it, Republicans swept to power in many states, particularly within the industrial Midwest that had once been a union bastion before the factories relocated. Their victories came over the opposition of the unions in their states. (And that of Working America – a not-quite-union established by the AFL-CIO, in which organizers went door to door in working-class neighborhood, enrolling voters who weren't union members in an organization with no dues that enabled the AFL-CIO to get its political message to these voters.) Generally, union political programs have been quite successful – getting white male union (or Working America) members, for instance, to vote for Democrats at a rate about 20 percent higher than their non-union counterparts. The unions' programs are one reason why Barack Obama swept the Midwestern states in the 2008 presidential election. But after its 2010 victory in state contests, in states where the auto and steel workers once had been dominant – Michigan, Wisconsin, Indiana, Ohio – a radical right Republican Party planned to strike back.

In Wisconsin, Republican Governor Scott Walker and the GOP legislature repealed collective bargaining rights for all public employees except the political popular police officers and fire fighters (whose unions had frequently endorsed Republicans). The move provoked a massive backlash from Democrats, liberals and unionists in this state with a long history of political activism. Some of the Republican state senators who'd supported the legislation were unseated later last year in special elections, and Governor Walker will be compelled to stand for a similar challenge this November.

In Ohio, the Republicans went further, repealing collective bargaining rights for all public employees including police and fire. This proved to be a major strategic mistake, particularly since, in Ohio, voters have the right to repeal newly enacted legislation at the polling place (a right which doesn't exist in Wisconsin). In November, by a nearly two-to-one margin, voters did indeed repeal the law, and Republican Governor John Kasich has seen his approval ratings in the polls dwindle to a little over 30 percent.

Indiana, the most conservative state in the industrial heartland, had negated public employee bargaining rights several years ago. But this year, it went South: In early February, it became the first state in decades, and the first state outside the South or Mountain West, to adopt the »right-to-work« provisions created by the Taft-Hartley Act, enabling private-sector workers covered by union contracts to drop their membership in the union and the obligation to pay dues into it, though they remain the beneficiaries of the contractual provisions the union negotiates. Just as the states that repealed collective bargaining for government employees argued that they could no longer afford to pay union-negotiated benefits, so states like Indiana are arguing that manufacturers are more likely to open factories in »right-to-work« states.

Wisconsin, Ohio and Indiana are just the most notable of the many non-Southern states were Republicans swept to power in 2010 that are considering either ending collective bargaining for public workers or weakening private-sector unions through right-to-work legislation. The heavily Republican legislature of New Hampshire is pushing bills that would do both, over the opposition of a Democratic governor who may not command enough legislative votes to sustain his veto. Republican legislators in Minnesota and West Virginia, both onetime union bastions, are pushing right-to-work legislation. Vehemently anti-union states such as Arizona and South Carolina, which are already right-to-work states that prohibit public-sector collective bargaining, are moving legislation that would further restrict union activities, though such activities are already so restricted that these are largely symbolic acts. (In South Carolina, the total unionization rate for public and private sector combined is just a little over 3 percent of the work force.) But in a time when the Republican Party is dominated by the Tea Party movement, such moves, both real and symbolic, are not surprising.

The one group of public employees most subjected to attacks are teachers. In discussing other public employees, the Republican right complains that the cost of their pensions or paychecks are unsustainable in hard times, and this is a message that resonates with major portions of the public, though support for ending collective bargaining rights is limited to a considerably smaller portion, as the Ohio referendum and nationwide polling from Gallup and the Pew Foundation make clear. But the two teacher unions – the American Federation of Teachers and the National Education Association – have also become the scapegoats for upper-class educational »reformers« who blame America's economic woes on the failings of America's inner city schools. Though many surveys have demonstrated that inner-city schools encounter the same level of difficulties in cities with and without unionized teachers, blaming the unions has become the common fare of newspaper editorialists and commentators.

5. And in Washington…

The Republican attack on unions hasn't been confined to the states. The radical, Southernized Republican Party that holds sway in the U.S. House of Representatives, and that can block legislation and presidential appointments in the U.S. Senate due to rules that require a super-majority of 60 percent to get anything through that increasingly dysfunctional body, has had its sites set on labor as well.

In the House, some Tea Party Republicans have publicly discussed enacting the »right-to-work« legislation that states have adopted on a federal level, though this is obviously something that couldn't become law absent a Republican president and a much more heavily Republican congress (including 60 Republican senators). In the Senate, Republicans have been warring on the National Labor Relations Board since Obama became president.

By law, the NLRB must have five members – two from each party, and the tie-breaking fifth to come from the president's party. In recent years, the gap between the appointees of the two parties has grown as wide as the gap between labors and employers generally, with Democratic appointees backing workers rights under the NLRA and Republican appointees seeking to thwart those rights. When George W. Bush was president, Senate Democrats balked at confirming some of his appointees, reducing the number of board members, at one point, to just two. In 2009, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that with only two members, the NLRB lacked a quorum and could not legally issue any rulings.

Also in 2009, Senate Republicans balked at confirming one of Obama's appointees, compelling the president to resort to a »recess appointment« – a one-year appointment of a federal official while the Congress is in recess, a tactics that previous presidents had now then resorted to as well. But when the NLRB's general counsel – not a board member, and not in consultation with any board members – ruled that Boeing could not relocate work to a new factory in South Carolina because a Boeing executive had publicly stated that the relocation was happening because the company wished to avoid strikes, a statement that is explicitly a violation of the NLRA (countless companies have relocated for precisely that reason but haven't broadcasted the fact), Republicans pounced. (The dispute between Boeing and its union was resolved and the general counsel withdrew his ruling, but that had no effect on the political battle it had kicked off.) They refused to confirm any further NLRB appointees, which would have reduced its membership, since some members' terms were ending, to a powerless two. Faced with the prospect of the nation's labor law enforcer being unable to enforce labor law, Obama made three recess appointments, including one Republican member, during the year-end 2011–12 break. Republicans in both the House and Senate have contended he acted illegally, and they may seek to strip all funding for the NLRB in next year's budget.

As with the federalization of right-to-work laws, the extermination of the NLRB awaits a clean sweep in the 2012 elections, which looks increasingly unlikely. For the present, though, the Republican attacks at the national and state level, compounded by the failure of the Democrats in 2009–10 to reform labor law, have placed American unions completely on the defensive.

But if unions are not organizing, they are certainly encouraging others to do so. Last year, unions responded warmly and supportively to the emergence of Occupy Wall Street, providing offices and equipment to the occupiers and rallying to their support on some occasions when police threatened to clear them away. Unions are working with a wide range of groups to publicize the issue of economic inequality, and the role unions play in mitigating it. In so doing, unions have made common cause with the kinds of activists whom unions during the Cold War years at the AFL-CIO routinely shunned.

But if today's unions have gained anything from the battering they've taken, it's the knowledge that in America today, they have an outcast status not all that different from the Occupy Wall Street demonstrators. In the limited spheres in which they can act, Richard Trumka's AFL-CIO and many of its member unions, as well as those of the Change To Win Federation, are willing to take chances and embrace as allies critics of American capitalism whom their predecessors would have derided. As well, unions are continuing their political organizing among key constituencies, Latinos particularly, that could return the Democrats to power in 2012 and subsequent elections. Their own efforts to build working-class organizations that could compel the Democrats to heed issues of economic justice more than they have in the past have been a sometime thing at best. The SEIU's efforts during the past year to do non-union community organizing among the inner-city poor have failed to produce any substantial organization. The AFL-CIO's Working America community organizing among the white working class of Ohio played a significant role in that state's voters' repeal of Kasich's law, but whether such a group can compel Democratic legislators in less union-friendly terrains to champion workers' interests remains to be seen.

It's a dark night for American unions, and they know it. The chief hope of some of the smartest union strategists whom I know is that America's young people, whom polling shows to be quite disenchanted with the workings of American capitalism, albeit knowing little to nothing about unions, will help build a force for economic justice that will include within it a role for a renewed, and in some ways new, labor movement. In the meantime, the unions are consumed with battling those that would diminish them to naught.

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