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# Introduction: Labor in the South

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# INTRODUCTION

F. RAY MARSHALL†

A free and democratic labor movement has been a growing component of American democracy throughout the history of our nation. Born in a hostile environment and tempered by conflict often punctuated by violence, the trade union movement today has become an integral part of our economic and political life.

Unions traditionally have been a leading force for social improvements benefiting all citizens. Labor has worked actively and successfully to win enactment of a wide range of social legislation, ranging from universal, free, public education to civil rights for minorities and women and social security and minimum wage guarantees for all workers. In a very real sense, the trade union movement has been, and remains today, in the forefront of our struggle for social justice.

No area of this country has been affected more directly by labor's participation in these struggles than has the South. Long characterized as a region hostile to the ideals of industrial democracy, the South developed, over the years, a homogeneous economic and political system that discouraged the growth of unions. From an historical viewpoint, the South's peculiar institutions of slavery, a plantation-oriented agricultural system, and a limited non-agricultural labor force helped give the region's antebellum economy a "colonial" status—a supplier of raw materials to manufacturers in the North and in Europe.

After the Civil War and Reconstruction, industrialization and urbanization took off in the South. Many, however, saw a potential conflict between industrial development and the region's traditional social values. Legal and cultural segregation became an accepted way of life and for decades restricted the labor market potential of both blacks and whites. In addition, manufacturers in the region often used these conditions to gain their own competitive advantage. The forces of tradition and change remained at war in the South long after 1900.

Since the New Deal years of the 1930's, both industry and organized labor in the South have made significant advances. The region is now a full partner in America's industrial production, and the prevailing southern ideology is being changed by industrialization, urbanization, and cultural diversity to become increasingly compatible with the principles and methods of collec-

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† Secretary of Labor of the United States; B.A. 1949, Millsaps College; M.A. 1950, Louisiana State University; Ph.D. 1954, University of California at Berkeley. Secretary Marshall also has authored several books on labor, including: *HUMAN RESOURCES AND LABOR MARKETS* (1972) (co-authored with A. Cartter); *LABOR ECONOMICS* (1972) (co-authored with A. Cartter); *LABOR IN THE SOUTH*; *RURAL WORKERS IN RURAL LABOR MARKETS* (1974); *THE ROLE OF UNIONS IN THE AMERICAN ECONOMY* (1976) (co-authored with B. Rungeling).

tive bargaining. Although many of the region's traditional institutions have left their mark, there can be little doubt, as the topics of this symposium's articles clearly show, that there has been a convergence of institutions between the South and the rest of the country.

While the trade union movement in the South has been influenced strongly by national union trends and policies, the region always has had an indigenous labor movement of its own. Many bona fide unions were formed in major cities of the South before the Civil War by printers, machinists, blacksmiths, cigar makers, carpenters, brickmasons, and others. The war, in fact, interrupted an expanding southern labor movement.

During both world wars, trade union organizing activity increased, and national organizations like the AFL, CIO, and UMW experienced growth in union membership. But during the 1950's and 1960's opposition increased to union activities, especially to the efforts of industrial unions to organize such industries as textiles, petroleum refining, pulp and paper, and boat building. Today, unions again are turning their attention to the South, this time concentrating on particular targets rather than general organizing campaigns.

Organized labor in the South and throughout the nation today is engaged in some of the toughest struggles it has faced since the violent years of its birth. Today's contests, however, are being fought in courtrooms and in government agencies rather than in the streets and factories. At a time when inflation, energy shortages, and other national economic problems are threatening the living standards of all working people, organized labor is threatened by well-organized groups seeking to undermine some of the most basic protections afforded American workers.

Efforts have been made in recent years to weaken or repeal the Davis-Bacon Act, a law that keeps the government from using its vast economic powers to depress wages in the construction industry. The concept of the prevailing wage is important to all workers, and the law is just as necessary today as when it was passed in 1931.

Repeated legislative proposals have sought to restrict the protections offered under the Occupational Safety and Health Act and to exempt large groups of workers from coverage under the law. These efforts come at a time when administrative improvements have turned this law around to combat effectively the serious threats to workers' safety and health posed by toxic chemicals, carcinogens, and other insidious hazards. Government and organized labor must remain united in their determination to make a safe and healthful working environment a guaranteed right of every worker.

A comprehensive, and much needed, labor law reform proposal to strengthen the National Labor Relations Act was defeated by well-organized lobbying efforts aimed at Congress. A continuing fight must and will be waged to pass a bill that will strengthen penalties against employers who violate workers' legal rights and that will stop the endless legal maneuvers that deny workers the right to organize and bargain collectively. The National Labor Relation Act (along with special laws governing collective bargaining for

the airlines and railroads and among federal employees) forms the legal foundation of the trade union movement in America. It is basic to our ideals of industrial democracy and must be preserved to guarantee legal protections to future generations of workers.

The greatest scourge to labor is, and always has been, unemployment. Trade unions have worked closely with government in programs to provide needed training and skills to the jobless and underemployed. Since 1977, more than 9 million jobs have been created for men, women, and young people, resulting in the largest employment expansion of any comparable period in U.S. history.

To help formulate a comprehensive solution to the problems of unemployment and inflation, leaders of business, labor, and government recently have formed an historic National Accord, giving the people most affected by economic policy a hand in developing programs to combat these problems. The National Accord gives people with a vital stake in making our economic policies work an important role in formulating and monitoring federal economic stabilization policies. The National Accord gives us the unprecedented opportunity to show the world that Americans can work together—that we can set aside our differences—to reassert our world economic leadership. The Accord and other specialized cooperative mechanisms in the coal, construction, steel, and transportation industries are based on the belief that cooperation between labor, management, and government is required to solve many of the country's pressing problems.

The full range of our domestic policies is coordinated now to reduce inflation and unemployment. A comprehensive urban policy has been developed along with an initiative to improve conditions in rural areas and small towns. This initiative will have a strong impact on labor in the South since many of the region's industrial plants are located outside major metropolitan areas.

Revived and expanded programs for housing, public transportation, environmental protection, civil rights enforcement, and aid to education also must be continued to both improve the quality of life and open up additional employment opportunities—not only for people who need jobs now, but for the growing number of men and women entering our labor force in the future.

These issues, and many others, will confront labor in the South in the coming years. This symposium focuses on many of the region's greatest challenges and on many of its greatest opportunities. The social, economic, and political changes they will bring are as necessary as they are inevitable.

The articles and discussions produced here should provide welcome thought and insight for all of us who share a vested interest in the future of the South and the well-being of the people who live and work there.

