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Although for decades anti-labor activism has been a feature of the Right’s economic and political agenda, key historical developments have shaped and, indeed, intensified anti-union campaigns in particular ways. This paper considers the ways in which domestic capital flight in the post-World War II period not only strengthened the Right’s impulse to suppress unions but also—by drawing southern leaders into alliances with northern and national business leaders—helped consolidate the power of the Right itself.

For generations, southern planters and businessmen sought to constrain union activity and limit workers’ rights. In the early postwar period, elite southerners’ impulse to attract northern industry further heightened their desire to block organized labor’s presumed advancement, on the grounds that a non-union (or at least a fiercely anti-union) climate was a necessary condition for the South’s industrial growth. They found firm support among northern employers and representatives of national business organizations, whose interest in exploiting distinctions between states and regions was well served by campaigns to prevent unionization in the South. Arguing (privately as well as publicly) that the labor movement was a serious contender for power at the national level, southerners and their allies invoked “states’ rights” as a vehicle through which to preserve economic as well as political and racial control.

Alongside efforts to counter labor organizing in the workplace, these cross-regional collaborators—key players in the “economic Right” despite their varying party affiliations—took their fight into the political realm. Facing major obstacles to their efforts to organize southern workers, northern-based unions called for federal policies both to impose constraints on migratory employers and to reduce regional inequities by equalizing labor conditions across the states. At the same time, they sought to claim federal resources on behalf of workers and communities reeling from the ravages of capital flight. Anti-union southerners and their business allies, perceiving these campaigns as a direct challenge to employers’ freedom of movement (figuratively as well as literally), countered by advocating a “states’ rights” program that privileged local, private initiative over federal control.

The study of capital migration, then, helps explain leading southerners’ increased antipathy toward unionism in the postwar period as well as their emerging coalition with labor’s adversaries outside the South. It also demonstrates the ways in which economic conflict between labor and capital has been (and remains) linked to political conflict between federal and state (and local) power in the United States.