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The Deadly Embrace: Racism, Anti-Communism and Anti-unionism; The Right Wing Crusade Against Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Southern Labor Movement

When George Bush ran for President in 2000, his campaign sent out a piece of literature that pledged to repeal the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938, indicating the links of right-wing Republicans to the anti-labor campaigns of employers going back to their long-standing efforts to overturn the New Deal. Although rhetorically accepting gains of equal citizenship for African Americans and Hispanics that could not be turned back, he represented the culmination of decades of efforts to turn back labor and civil rights. Bush presided over one of the most anti-union, anti-worker administrations in history.

Bush came from an anti-union, right-wing business culture based in the Deep South and the oil rich Southwest. In this region, reactionary individuals and organizations with white church and business support spearheaded a coalition to kill all movements for social change, concentrating first on the labor movement in the 1940s and 1950s and then increasingly on the civil rights movement in the 1950s and 1960s. Emanating from that region came groups such as the Southern States Industrial Council, born in 1933 as a business association to stop the industrial union movement; the Christian Anti-Communist Crusade, led by Rev. Billy James Hargis and then Fred Schwartz, born in the 1940s to turn back all forms of modernism and liberalism; Harding College, in eastern Arkansas, which for decades put out flyers and conducted classes (including extension courses on southern military bases) linking communism, civil rights and unions; the White Citizens Council, formed in Mississippi and spread across the South to mobilize a terror campaign against anyone supporting black civil rights; the Ku Klux Klan, used alternatively to attack CIO organizers in Birmingham, Gadsden, and other places, and to murder civil rights activists; and many lesser-known local and regional organizations, as well as national organizations like the John Birch Society that established a foothold in the South. These reactionary forces supported Barry Goldwater’s run for the presidency in 1964 and helped to begin the great historic swing of white voters away from the Democratic to the nearly all-white Republican Party of today.

This paper traces the dialectic of struggle between forces of reaction and progress in the South as they relate to the labor and civil rights movements and to the increasingly expansive social vision of King. It first of all documents some of the ultra-right influences mentioned above, emerging in the South in direct response to labor and civil rights organizing, with especially strong support from business people and industrialists. They felt the need to mobilize to turn the South away from a freer and more equal region promised by the grass-roots forces that were part of the New Deal. By 1946, labor and civil rights activists threatened the class interests of white businessmen and landowners. The possibilities for change then seemed much more favorable for the future of both workers and ethnic minorities than than they do today. The CIO reasonably believed it could extend the union gains of World War II across the ranks of workers in the South, and launched Operation Dixie to do it. The Southern Conference for Human Welfare had a strong network of organizers supporting labor and civil rights and voting rights as
prongs of the same movement. Highlander Folk School had established a popular school in which black and white workers increasingly joined together after the war to compare their experiences and plan their organizing drives. The anti-fascist, largely pro-union and increasingly pro-civil rights ideology of the war and the increasingly inclusive framework of the Democratic Party also seemed to open the door to change, and many signs indicated that the southern working class could respond in a powerfully progressive way. Many factors, however, led to defeat. The dreadful terrorism directed at Operation Dixie, the Taft-Hartley act, the merger of the more racially conservative AFL with the CIO, the purge of much of labor’s left, the rise of the Truman-Nixon-McCarthy era, and reactionary mobilization against the Brown V. Board of Education decision, shredded the promise of a labor-civil rights coalition based in the South. The House Un-American Activities Committee supported by Richard Nixon and Senator James Eastland, who also led the White Citizen’s Council, provided additional government vehicles to destroy labor and civil rights and to build an ideological consensus unfavorable to both.

Surprisingly, that period of failure brought forth a stunning new leader, Martin Luther King, Jr., who fashioned a vision of Christian social democracy and democratic political expansion. King used America’s promise of freedom in the Cold War contest with socialism as rhetorical leverage for change, and simultaneously helped to break open the hold of rigid, paranoid anti-Communism. This paper documents the extensive labor connections King developed during and after the Montgomery Bus Boycott, and suggests that the hatred directed at him from reactionary movements and from top levels of government resulted not just from his leadership in the black freedom movement but from his pro-labor, emancipatory politics. King threatened to take the country once again in the direction of a grassroots coalition for a reordering of American priorities and values. By the early 1960s, King voiced his hope for a Negro-Labor coalition for civil rights, voting rights, and for massive improvements for the working poor. King hoped for a new interracial, working-class movement that could defeat the forces of the ultra-right and employers and make the South a bastion of progressive politics. By the time of his death in 1968, King voiced an even more expansive vision of the U.S. as a whole moving toward European-style industrial democracy. He called for dismantling America’s war machine in favor of a “second phase” of the freedom movement for “economic equality” that would benefit all the peoples of the world.

King’s support for unions, for civil liberties for all (including Communists and socialists), for an end to war and for an expansive agenda for racial and economic equality raised alarms among the business classes throughout the South but also at the highest levels of government. This paper will focus on how hard right opposition to King developed and accelerated and coincided with and helped to strengthen the anti-union backlash that still reigns in the South today. By way of illustration, it will show how Mayor Henry Loeb, who did so much to precipitate the crisis in Memphis that led to King’s death, had deep roots in the reactionary, anti-union and racist employer culture in the South. He belonged to the Southern States Industrial Council, a rabidly anti-union employer organization that fought the CIO in the 1930s. His family’s enterprise, Loeb Laundry and Dry Cleaners, going back to the 1920s had exploited black workers and developed a combination of tactics to stall their union efforts: paternalism, mixed with
firing, worker replacement, and phony bargaining. Loeb said his daddy taught him to defeat unions by gradually wearing workers down through stalling tactics and striker replacements, methods he followed in the Memphis sanitation strike. Loeb gained his political career through the American Legion Post in Memphis, a spawning ground for anti-communist politicians, and also took a stand as an ardent segregationist. As a Jew, he first gained some black support, but he later switched to Episcopalian and quickly became enemy number one in the black community. Throughout the 1960s, Memphis was awash with anti-communist rhetoric, linked to defeating unions, the civil rights movement, and the anti-war movement. Memphis suffered from a climate of hate spreading across the country via the John Birch Society, the paramilitary right, the KKK and WCC, and neo-Nazi. Many of these organizations and individuals stalked and threatened King and murdered numerous civil rights leaders.

In his persona and his thinking, Loeb represented a kind of mental illness among many white business and political leaders in the South. Believing their own propaganda aimed at defeating movements for change, they lacked the flexibility to understand social movements or to adequately respond to them. The Memphis Congressman Dan Kuykendall could not understand the difference between an anti-war demonstrator with long hair and a communist guerilla. Such middle-class business people suffered from a myopia that a network of employers and right wing organizations had cultivated for decades; many of them were just as unthinking as those who belonged to the KKK. Unions had gained a degree of acceptance in the North, but not so in the South. Anti-labor, anti-civil rights views infected the southern mass media. When King came to Memphis, most whites saw him not as a nonviolent crusader but as a purveyor of hate and violence, and hoped to destroy him and his movement. With King’s death, numerous whites in the middle class, teachers, businessmen, physicians, made comments such as “good riddance,” “good news,” and “its about time.” Based on contradictions and unanswered questions and the lack of a trial for James Earl Ray, King’s alleged assassin, people have for years asked who killed King? But we should ask also, what killed King? A culture of hate killed King, fanned by pro-business employers and segregationists based in the Deep South and the Southwest, as well as police and federal agents and right wing organizations nationally.

This paper will suggest that our scholarship has not fully plumbed the depths of the hatred stirred by the ultra-right, which has fought for years to crush both the labor and the civil rights movements -- and has merged the efforts of employers to destroy organized labor with the efforts of evangelical Christian and white supremacist organizations to turn back all signs of progress. These forces today have made the South the least unionized sector in the United States; in North Carolina, home to progressive universities and research think tanks, less than five percent of workers belong to unions. Attacks against immigrant workers, African Americans, and white workers have produced poverty, lack of education, disillusionment, and hopelessness. Turning this country around for organized labor, among other things, requires a more serious reckoning and engagement by researchers with a history in which reactionary forces have merged racism and anti-communism with anti-union propaganda to turn working-class people against their own interests and to deny them the leaders they need to bring about
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change. To the heavy toll the right wing has taken on workers and racial minorities, we might add the loss of one of the greatest leaders this country has ever produced.