In January 1955, soon after his first inauguration as governor of Arkansas, Orval Eugene Faubus went before the state’s CIO affiliate, the Arkansas Industrial Union Council, to thank the delegates for their help in the recent election. In 1953 and 1954, the Arkansas labor movement, with money from both the CIO and the AFL, had funded a massive campaign to convince both trade unionists and African Americans to pay their poll taxes and cast ballots in the Democratic primary. The main goal had been to fashion a political coalition of blacks and working-class whites to unseat Sen. John McClellan, but Faubus ended up as the main beneficiary. “You made the difference in my victory,” he acknowledged to the integrated crowd of 200 trade unionists. The governor promised to repay the labor movement by working for passage of labor’s political agenda, at the top of which was the elimination of the poll tax, which kept large numbers of working-class blacks and whites from voting.

Faubus, at least initially, was the type of southern politician that trade unionists loved. Reared in a humble socialist household—his middle name honored Eugene Debs—and briefly educated at Commonwealth College, the new governor was young, bright, charismatic, ambitious, moderate if not liberal on racial matters, and decidedly pro-union. Within three years, though, the relationship between Faubus and the Arkansas labor movement had soured as Faubus turned to the right, mostly in response to the integration of Little Rock’s Central High. The Arkansas AFL-CIO passed resolutions denouncing him for betraying the interests of the working class, challenged the constitutionality of most of his initiatives in court, and recruited candidates to run against him. Faubus, never one to retreat from a fight, gave as good as he got, intervening in federation elections and casting himself as the defender the white working class against the encroachments of the federal government and black activists. Faubus articulated a populist vision that stressed increased aid to the poor and elderly, improvements in education, enticements to business to aid industrial development and job growth, and resistance to the liberal elite, which included trade union leaders.

This paper will argue that Faubus’s populism and his attacks on Arkansas labor offered a model for those seeking to undermine the power of the labor movement. Unlike the traditional opponents of labor in Arkansas—Joe Robinson, Ben Laney, John McClellan—and throughout the South who tried to unite farmers, planters and the middle class to battle the power of labor, Faubus appealed directly to white workers, portraying himself as their true leader and the state’s labor leaders as pawns of eastern or northern labor “bosses.” In the 1960s, politicians—most notably George Wallace—would emulate Faubus’s tactics on a much larger scale, turning good chunks of the white working class against the labor movement.