America’s Anti-Union Culture since 1945

This paper will outline the image of unions in American culture since 1945. It will trace how organized labor’s legitimization myth that was established in 1930s was gradually undermined by the 1970s. During the New Deal the image of unions as the representative of the underprivileged had gained a firm foothold and justified their place in American society. Following World War II conservative and business interests launched a wide-ranging public relations campaign designed to convince Americans that unions, far from being the champions of workers, actually worked against their interests. A portrait of unions as undemocratic, prone to corruption, and more interested in the enrichment of their leaders than the advancement of their members was created that deeply influenced Americans’ understanding of organized labor. Although this image of unions would persist through the remainder of the twentieth century, the structural changes in American society brought about by the post-war economic boom that did the most to undermine the legitimacy of unions. The general prosperity, particularly the growth in wages for union members, created the impression that unions now spoke for the haves rather than the have-nots. Moreover, the economic stagnation and high inflation of the 1970s, coupled with the rise of foreign competition, created the impression that organized labor was inimical to the economic health of the nation. These changes in attitude set the stage for Ronald Reagan’s successful campaign against unions in the 1980s.