The Failure of Labor Reform 1978: Proposal for Labor and the Right Conference

Judith Stein

Although anti-unionism is intrinsic to management – from the president of Wal-Mart to the president of Columbia University, acting on the ideology is often constrained, even in the United States. In the U.S. anti-unionism has varied over time and in the different regions of the nation. The 1970s was a decade which saw increased anti-unionism. Towards the end of the decade open anti-union expression and action became more frequent and potent. This paper argues that during the decade various business groups, which in the past did not agree, were able to incorporate the economic downturn of the mid-decade into anti-union arguments and power. Such organization as the Business Roundtable, National Association of Manufacturers and Chamber of Commerce combined these economic arguments with political arguments, attributing the recent spate of business regulation to the labor movement. This upsurge of antiunionism, unlike that of the 1930s, was not countered by liberals, whose embrace of unions had been ebbing after the war. The failure of labor reform legislation in 1978 demonstrates this combination of business mobilization and liberal acquiescence.

The paper is based upon the records of the Ford and Carter administration, AFL-CIO, National Association of Manufacturers, and Chamber of Commerce papers.