

1980 ELECTIONS: LABOR LOCKED OUT

Life is getting harder for everyone but the very rich in the United States, and the people need a stronger voice in U.S. politics. Yet labor is practically invisible on the political scene in 1980. As the choice for president offered by the Democrats and the Republicans shrinks down to nothing worth voting for, we have to ask: Could organized labor have made a difference? To put it bluntly: Where has labor been while proven disaster, Carter, and right-winger, Reagan, jockeyed their way into the final stretch of the presidential race?

Where Has Labor Been?

Go back a year or so. Remember all the talk by union leaders about the growing conservatism, the anti-labor big business attacks on working people? You might remember two years ago when Doug Fraser, United Auto Workers' president, left the government's Labor-Management Group in disgust. At the time, he said that the business community was waging a "one-sided class war against working people, the unemployed, the poor, the minorities, the very young and the very old, and even many in the middle-class of our society;" he said he would not go along.

And there was some real militancy: the miners, the rubber workers, the Teamsters all showed what they thought of the president's 7% wage guidelines. They won contract settlements with wage increases of 10% and up. Around the same time, a new "Progressive Alliance" dedicated itself to building a working relationship between labor, the Black movement, the women's movement, and other peoples' movements. It set out to provide a pole of leadership against the right-wing and the growing conservative trend in the Democratic Party. It seemed like workers might gain an independent voice in Washington.

A House of Cards

But where is all the independent action on the part of labor now? As the elections got closer, labor leaders backed down.

What happened in the past, happened again. Some labor leaders indulged in pork barrelling with the President. It went like this: "I know there's not enough to go around, but put something in my barrel, give me something special to take back to my membership, and I'll get the vote out for you." Carter raised the trigger price for steel, and soon after, McBride of the United Steelworkers of America came out with an endorsement for -- guess who? Jimmy Carter. And so it went. One by one, half the big unions got picked off by Carter. Most of the rest looked to Kennedy to fight it out for them in the Democratic Party. The great majority of workers in smaller unions and unorganized workplaces were left empty-handed.

Once again, labor leaders talked tough but then chose the back-room deal. Once again they lobbied in Washington and only used union power to get out a

big Democratic vote. Jimmy Carter asked Lane Kirkland, new president of the AFL-CIO, to speak for labor in a "National Accord" with business and government. Kirkland treated Carter's offer like something he couldn't refuse. This month Kirkland publically complained about Carter's "backward" and "destructive" policies. But he stays on. The truth is, by now, Kirkland and Co. have nowhere else to go. As long as they refuse to draw on the unions' main source of political strength -- the unity of all workers combined -- they leave labor with no political outlet but the old Democratic Party channels.

But just as management knows when workers are not prepared for a strike, Democratic Party leaders know when they can call labor's bluff. Democrats like Carter will always have the option of selling workers short -- no matter how angry individuals get -- if labor doesn't help build independent political organization city by city, state by state, and country-wide.

This year, Carter went right ahead with his "anti-inflation" plans that would throw workers out of their jobs and cut services to the people. Once again, our labor leaders huffed and puffed. Yet the threat of any independent political action on the part of labor fell apart like a house of cards.



Labor has got to stop making excuses for capital in this country. Labor leaders act too much like they have to solve all the economy's problems before we can stand up for our rights and living standards. The working class has got to get on top of the political situation, figure things out for ourselves, and work with everyone willing to fight for progressive change.

The labor movement went through a year of searching only to retreat at election time; a wave of strikes and activism and a return to back room dealing. For labor to count in U.S. politics, we have to stop trailing after the Democrats while they trail after the Republicans. Labor has a challenge ahead: to help chart an independent, progressive way for the majority of U.S. people in the 1980's.

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