

REVIEW

The Unions and the Democrats: An Enduring Alliance. By Taylor Dark. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999. 233 pp. Hardcover, \$37.50.

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The sentiment among international union leaders who deposed Lane Kirkland as AFL-CIO president in 1995 seemed obvious to most observers of organized labor in the United States. For the two decades that Kirkland led the federation, he failed to advance organized labor's legislative agenda of reforming labor law, protecting welfare programs, and advancing neo-Keynesian policies deemed vital to labor's success in the post-New Deal era. For many, Kirkland's legacy was his promotion abroad of the U.S. model of trade unionism—a model in which organized labor is conceived as just one interest group among many, rather than as the basis for defending and increasing the economic and political power of workers. By 1995, the international union leaders who deposed Kirkland had recognized this interest-group strategy as having contributed in large measure to the paralysis of organized labor as a political force in American society. Labor's declining political influence can be viewed in relation to at least three factors:

1. *Declining Union Density.* The spiraling decline in organized labor's density in the workforce from about 35 percent in the mid-1950s to about 13 percent today is indicative of labor's lost political clout. As the century ends, union density in the private sector hovers in the 9 percent range—threatening to call into question the future status of unionized workers in the public sector, where density hovers around 60 percent. This decline has been linked to labor's decreasing capacity to mobilize the majority of workers who are not in unions—and therefore to its growing irrelevance in national political debates. While many unions had long ago abandoned organizing new workers to focus on collective bargaining, many complained that antiquated labor law and the renewed willingness of employers to use union-busting tactics to break organizing drives made it nearly impossible to organize workers into unions.

2. *The Rise of the Republican Party.* For more than fifty years, organized labor has been unable to overturn

key provisions of the Taft-Hartley Act that vitiate labor's ability to organize workers. Taft-Hartley—passed by a Republican Congress in 1947 against a veto by Truman—banned the closed shop. Section 14(b) of the act allows states to enact right-to-work legislation barring union shops. Organized labor made repeal of Taft-Hartley its primary legislative objective, but failed in this mission even when Democrats held the presidency and both houses of Congress. Although union decline had begun three decades earlier, in the early 1980s many labor leaders were caught by surprise by the Reagan administration's success in eviscerating New Deal welfare programs and by the effectiveness of Reagan appointees to the National Labor Relations Board and the Department of Labor in breaking strikes and stifling organizing drives. Following Reagan's lead in firing striking air traffic controllers, emboldened private-sector employers for the first time permanently replaced striking workers, severely compromising the power of the strike, a weapon that had long restrained employers from taking on unions and their wage demands.

3. *Democratic Indecisiveness.* By the mid-1990s, labor leaders were grumbling that they could not keep Democrats accountable for supporting legislation important to unions. Candidates were simply taking labor's money and resources to get elected, only to take union support for granted once in office. Although labor had been acclimating itself to Democratic ambivalence, President

Bill Clinton's active support of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) over strident union objections deepened an already profound sense of powerlessness among labor leaders. The AFL-CIO and its international union affiliates failed to sway enough votes to defeat the agreement, which threatened to eliminate hundreds of thousands of unionized jobs in the United States. Moreover, Clinton's support for a balanced budget further weakened organized labor's ability to find congressional backing for public-sector-worker wage increases and welfare programs.

In the wake of the NAFTA debacle, key international union leaders concluded that simply electing a Democratic majority to Congress would not be enough. To reverse its fortunes, the AFL-CIO needed to make the Democratic party accountable. What seemed to mark the six decades since the New Deal was the transformation of labor from a social movement to just another interest group. It is in this light that we may best view Taylor Dark's examination of labor's relationship with the Democratic party.

In *The Unions and the Democrats: An Enduring Alliance*, Dark challenges as ill conceived the conventional wisdom that organized labor is in a state of political crisis. The New Deal alliance between organized labor and the Democratic party, he suggests, is alive and well. Labor's influence in national politics has not declined; indeed, he argues, unions have remained "remarkably

successful in holding on to political power" (p. 1). Despite indisputable evidence of declining union membership since the 1950s, the rise of Republicans in national politics, and labor's failure to hold Democrats accountable on trade legislation, Dark argues that organized labor's position in national politics has remained relatively stable since the New Deal.

At the core of Dark's analysis is his charting of bargaining relationships between labor and the Democratic party in the past three decades. Bargaining power for both, he argues, is most effective when leaders of the two groups have succeeded in consolidating key constituencies. When institutional fragmentation occurs—as it has in the past quarter-century—labor leaders are unable to bargain successfully with Democratic presidents and congressional leaders, who are in turn unable to deliver legislation or set policies favorable to organized labor.

This recent history of fragmentation, according to Dark, is undergirded by the more basic fragmentation in the American federal political system. The decentralized nature of national politics—and consequently of the labor movement—has contributed to the recent inability of the Democratic party and the AFL-CIO to discipline their ranks and act in concert to achieve common aims. Even before the current period, the party was split between its northern liberal and southern conservative wings. As a result of this sectionalism, party leaders could not prevent

the alliance of southern Democrats with Republicans in opposing legislation beneficial to labor.

In the 1970s, according to Dark, political reform in the Democratic party—in particular, the shift from elite bargaining to mass participation in delegate selection—meant that white male labor leaders had to compete for influence within the party with the representatives of new social movements that organized labor for years had disdained and were uneasy with—women, African Americans, Latinos, and other ethnic minorities. Trade unions traditionally excluded these groups from leadership positions—and frequently even from the rank and file. By this point, however, labor's clout in the party had declined drastically: "The days of determinative vetoes of presidential candidates, exercised behind closed doors and among long-standing political allies, were lost forever" (p. 9). Now, rather than cutting backroom deals, organized labor had to participate actively in Democratic primaries to support candidates of its choice. By the time the Carter administration was in place, splits within labor's ranks between service and manufacturing unions had contributed further to the weakening of labor's bargaining position. Moreover, Dark notes, the decentralized nature of the AFL-CIO prevented George Meany from controlling union presidents who opposed efforts to rein in inflation by curbing wage increases. By the end of Carter's first term, about half the international unions had split with

the AFL-CIO leadership to support Senator Edward Kennedy's bid for the Democratic nomination for the presidency.

Dark cites Meany's inability to control the collective bargaining behavior of organized labor in the 1960s and 1970s, during a period of rising inflation, as a major example of the fragmented nature of the federation. According to Dark, scholars too often regard the AFL-CIO as a united labor front, a monolithic entity, without taking into account the behavior of autonomous independent unions and their often divergent interests. Dark notes that the "ten or twelve . . . politically effective" unions in the federation represent a diverse mix of workers in differentiated industrial, service, and public-sector labor markets: United Auto Workers, United Steelworkers of America, Communications Workers of America, International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers, Service Employees International Union, United Food and Commercial Workers, International Brotherhood of Teamsters, American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees, American Federation of Teachers, Laborers International Union of North America, United Brotherhood of Carpenters, and Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees International Union (p. 6).

Dark is right about the need to analyze unions in a more complex fashion. There is a need to examine union success and failure as relative by analyzing *areas* of success and setback. Dark prescribes the need to

examine how unions can gain power in some institutional locations and suffer dramatic losses in others. But do these pluralist guidelines for examining union activity ignore structural shifts that have eroded New Deal programs that have been the result and continuing basis of union power?

Dark thinks that the New Deal alliance with labor has survived into the present.

In evaluating the idea that the New Deal legacy is moribund, we must recall that despite the best efforts of Presidents Reagan and Bush and the post-1994 Republican congressional majority, there has been no real transformation in public policy. While the New Deal *electoral coalition* may indeed have fragmented, and its ideology fallen into disrepute, New Deal *programs* have remained largely intact. (p. 200)

Although Democrats in general have supported organized labor's agenda, it is at minimum an exaggeration to say at present that the New Deal legacy remains "largely intact." By examining the relationship between Democrats and organized labor in isolation, Dark overlooks the dramatic and well-documented success that business interests have achieved within the Republican party. Indeed, even pro-labor Democratic members of Congress depend on campaign contributions from business to win close elections. It is accurate to say that Democrats, while they remain relatively loyal to the unions that support them, cannot deliver on many

of the promises they make to labor. While indeed this failure is related to the fragmentation of bargaining structures, it is related also to declining labor influence in politics over the past twenty-five years.

The Clinton administration has been supportive of labor law reform to benefit organized labor, but, because of Republican majorities in the House and Senate, it has failed to pass such legislation. Dark argues that labor law reform has been an unattainable objective of Democrats since the passage of Taft-Hartley. Better gauges of Clinton's support for organized labor, he argues, are the access the president provides key union leaders and the pro-labor appointments he has made to the National Labor Relations Board, the U.S. Department Labor, and other agencies. The dispute over trade policy between unions and the Clinton administration is viewed by Dark as a temporary conflict that does not threaten the enduring alliance between labor and the Democrats. Nonetheless, Dark must acknowledge in his conclusions that Clinton has not reversed the erosion of organized labor's power by seriously supporting labor law reform. Instead he has merely selected sympathetic officials to preside over agencies that remain eviscerated.

Although pro-labor NLRB appointments are important, they have failed to change in any significant way the fact that employers who oppose unions can continue to engage in union-busting tactics with seeming impunity. Moreover, amid

high hopes, Robert Reich's tenure as labor secretary evinces the low status that unions have in government policy-making. Even Dark acknowledges the minimal effect of Clinton's special relationship with union leaders in reversing the relentless decline of labor (p. 198). Dark selectively analyzes particular success stories—such as Clinton's allowing the teamster strike to proceed against the United Parcel Service in the summer of 1997 without government intervention—without mentioning related episodes such as the administration's failure to influence the NLRB to gain jurisdiction over organizing Federal Express workers. In June 1997—on Clinton's watch—the NLRB placed that jurisdiction under the 1926 National Railway Labor Act, which covers air carriers and express companies, forcing the 115,000 Federal Express workers at more than a thousand offices to vote on a national union. Under NLRB jurisdiction, workers could have been organized on a site-by-site basis. Indeed, Senator Ernest Hollings (D-SC) attached an amendment to a House-Senate conference report of the Federal Aviation Reauthorization Act in 1996 to ensure Federal Express's coverage under the National Railway Labor Act. Arguably, the Federal Express decision was more of a defeat for organized labor than the UPS decision was a success; the former cost unions a chance to organize new workers.

Of all Dark's arguments, however, perhaps the least persuasive is his assertion that the decline in union

density has not contributed to a weakening of union political power. He argues that

there is no causal force requiring that declining union density should inevitably translate into declining union political power. Indeed, there is good reason to believe the opposite: faced with a deterioration of their position in collective bargaining, unions may actually increase the resources they devote to politics, potentially leading to an expansion rather than reduction in union power. (pp. 21–22)

Moreover, he argues that, with regard to financial reserves, membership voting behavior, and organizational capacity, “aggregate union political resources . . . have generally remained stable; in some respects they have increased” (p. 196). That unions in decline still require a political strategy (if a different one) is obvious, but Dark’s argument neglects the fact that union strength in politics is linked historically to union density in the labor force—witness George Meany’s political clout in the 1950s and 1960s.

Arguing that density exerts no singular, determinate impact on union political influence, Dark observes nonetheless that recent decline “shows no signs of a reversal” (p. 19). Because he does not link the steady decline in union density to organized labor’s failure over decades to pass labor law reform, he is left at book’s end asking, rather lamely, “How much longer can the unions continue to generate political power if the membership base is stagnant?” (p. 203). Only by regarding unions as an

interest group rather than as a social movement, it seems, can Dark argue that they remain powerful despite dwindling membership. He uses the conventional interest-group measures to demonstrate:

The political power of an interest group is obviously not determined directly by the size of its membership. If political strength corresponded automatically to size, neither the American Jewish community nor the farm lobby (to cite just two examples) would have much influence in contemporary America. The same applies to labor. (p. 29)

But how appropriate is it to compare organized labor with the American Jewish community or the farm lobby? It is significant that Dark’s book is titled *The Unions and the Democrats*. Had Dark substituted the word *unions* with *labor movement* or *working class*, a completely different book might have been written, with decidedly different conclusions. Dark’s thesis is that the Democratic party has been a reliable, if at times ineffective, defender of the interests of organized labor in the United States. While Democratic presidents and members of Congress have adequately represented labor’s varied *institutional* interests, Dark has not considered the relationship of the labor movement as a whole with the party—a relationship that is unique when compared to that between organized labor and labor parties in the industrial countries of Western Europe. It is only by characterizing organized labor as just another interest group that Dark can make the case

that unions have advanced their interests through the Democratic party. Clearly, though, it is possible to envisage a labor-based political party that would be considerably more effective than the Democratic party in advancing the interests of the broader working class. Such a party would defend both the social status of workers and the institutional interests of organized labor.

Moreover, by viewing organized labor in isolation, as an interest group rather than as the remnant of a social movement, Dark fails to evaluate organized labor's success against the success of American business interests. Indeed, labor has fared quite badly in comparison to business, particularly since the late 1970s. How have Republicans in the White House and Congress delivered the goods for business, while Democrats have barely kept organized labor afloat? Significantly, Dark fails even to mention the baleful influence of

campaign finance on Democratic candidates, whose support for labor wavered in this period as they became increasingly dependent on money from business interests. Thus Dark's qualitative conclusion that the New Deal alliance remains intact fails to grasp the dramatic shift in the balance of power between business and labor in the United States in the past twenty years. While vestiges of the New Deal remained in 1995, they were in great disrepair. By focusing exclusively on elite bargaining relationships, Dark neglects to link labor's secular decline in membership since the 1950s to union lethargy and the Democratic party's failure to pass labor law reforms that again would allow workers to organize collectively. While Dark rightly emphasizes the need to avoid generalizations that overlook labor's successes, his analysis has led him to redefine and identify success simply by lowering the bar.