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The Future of Organized Labor in American Politics

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The Future of Organized Labor in American Politics, by Peter Francia, New York, Columbia University Press, 2006, 224 pp., US\$44.00 (cloth), ISBN 9780231130707

It is a long time since activists in the American labor movement had much to cheer. Since the mid-1970s, American unions have gone from loss to defeat. After losing the fight for labor law reform in the 1970s, unions were on the losing side when Ronald Reagan was elected President in 1980 and 1984, and they suffered horrific membership losses in the depression of the early 1980s and in the wake of Reagan's crushing of the Air Traffic Controllers strike in 1981. Activists who hoped that the election of Bill Clinton in 1992 would mark a turn in labor's fortunes were soon disabused of such hopes. Unable even to initiate labor law reform or to bring universal health insurance to a vote, the Clinton administration instead pushed through a balanced budget, enacted the North American Free Trade Accord (NAFTA) in 1993, and repealed Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) in 1996. Worse, still, widespread frustration with Clinton cost the Democrats control of both the Senate and the House of Representatives in 1994. Combined with declining union membership, these repeated political failures fueled an insurgent campaign that led to the election of John Sweeney as president of the American Federation of Labor-Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO) in 1995 and which was committed to revive American unions by allotting more money and rank-and-file energy to political activity and union organizing.

After over a decade, political scientist and labor activist Peter Francia has prepared a monograph exploring the impact of Sweeney's new direction on labor's political fortunes. He shows that Sweeney followed through on his pledge

to increase organized labor's political activities. Under his leadership, the AFL-CIO increased its organizing expenditures dramatically while shifting resources to field services and mobilization in hopes of sparking membership campaigns and political activity. In addition to mobilizing the rank-and-file, Sweeney's AFL-CIO has increased its commitment to traditional political action and fund raising. Between 1990 and 2002, for example, union political action committees (PACs) increased direct political contributions by over US\$18 million, an increase of over 50%, in addition to new independent expenditures of nearly US\$4 million. Francia also shows that labor's PACs have targeted expenditures more carefully, more strategically, under Sweeney. By focusing on helping challengers in competitive races, the AFL-CIO has focused its efforts on campaigns to restore Democratic control of Congress.

Francia applauds the Sweeney program of revived and retargeted political activities, because he finds evidence that it has contributed to the Democrat's revival after the debacle of 1994. Francia shows that, despite falling membership, labor's political mobilization added an extra 6.5 million union-member-household voters after 1994, increasing the union share of the electorate from 14% in 1994 up to 23% by 1998. Moreover, he shows that union members are increasingly likely to vote Democratic and, perhaps most significantly, they are increasingly active in trying to influence the vote of others. Francia uses an econometric analysis of election outcomes to calculate the impact of labor's political activities. He concludes that the AFL-CIO's activities were crucial to the election of nine additional Democratic House challengers under Sweeney, and labor's contributions and political mobilizing raised the Democratic vote share in Senate races under Sweeney by 2.8 percentage points, a shift critical to the victory of 12 successful Democratic Senate non-incumbents.

Published in 2006, Francia's finding may have been even stronger after that year's election when organized labor was crucial to the election of Democratic Senate and House candidates. There is also some evidence that these electoral successes may contribute to changes in policy. Already, the AFL-CIO has been rewarded with the passage of the Employee Free Choice Act intended to ease the process of union organizing; the bill faces a certain veto by President Bush, but it may become law if a Democrat is elected President in 2008. Before declaring victory, however, we should consider some important cautions.

First, unions have built their political success on their membership: their dues, votes, and mobilizing energies. Francia warns that declining membership could eventually limit the ability of unions to spread their political message. I wish that there were many more union members in the USA, but I am not particularly concerned that labor's political actions will be limited by its membership. Even after 60 years of stagnant membership, American unions are much larger than most other civic groups, including the National Rifle Association, the National Right to Life, Common Cause, and the National Abortion Rights Action League. Rather than membership size, the key variable in a group's political energy has been the intensity of effort per member. Growing union political influence under Sweeney has come from greater intensity of action rather than increased membership. Today, there remains much untapped potential union energy; unions and their members devote such a small share of their resources to political action that they still have much room to compensate with still more intensity for declines in membership. Unions can build their influence on 'better' rather than 'more'.

If Francia's fears for declining membership may be overdrawn, he may be overly optimistic about the policy implications of the AFL-CIO's political initiative. Like

much good empirical political analysis, he risks missing the forest for the trees. Yes, American unions have done much to support the revival of the Democratic Party; but there is no guarantee that the Democrats will reward labor. Instead, I fear that once in power Democratic politicians will follow the lead of Tony Blair and other European liberals, because America's Democrats have the luxury that comes from facing an unacceptable alternative. Where, can labor go if unhappy with the Democrats? Under Newt Gingrich in the 1990s and George W. Bush since 2001, the Republican Party has moved so far to the right that there is *no alternative* to voting Democratic. I was not surprised that Francia found that union voters are more likely to vote and to vote Democratic now than before 1995; I only wonder whether the AFL-CIO's political mobilization should have been more successful in the face of the remarkable right-wing take-over of the Republican Party.

The Republicans right-turn since the early 1990s has so polarized the American political system that unions have no alternative to supporting Democrats, even relatively conservative Democrats who do relatively little for unions and working people. Political polarization has also pulled the Democrats to the right in another way. The Republican's shift to the right has opened political space on the Democrat's right giving Democratic politicians the opportunity to lure reasonable conservatives from the Republicans so long as the Democrats emphasize noneconomic issues, such as civil liberties, scientific research, environment, and war. At the same time that the Republican's shift to the right has forced labor to rely entirely on one party, it has diluted the Democrats with the influx of would-be and even has-been Republicans driven from their Party by the demands of the right-wing. Today, for example, the Democrats control the US Senate because of the vote of Virginia's Senator James Webb, former Navy Secretary under

President Reagan and an active Republican into the present century; and they control the House of Representatives because of the election of Democrats from traditionally Republican seats throughout the affluent suburbs of Boston, Chicago, New York and Philadelphia.

Francia's book should be read by all interested in the political actions of the AFL-CIO and the prospects for building an effective left-politics in the USA, but one should be careful in drawing conclusions. With the Democrats pulled right by the opportunities created by Republican extremism, organized labor may provide only a weak anchor on the party's left. Yes, the AFL-CIO is doing more; but is it enough?

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