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The Failure of Operation Dixie
A Critical Turning Point in American Political Development?

Operation Dixie

In early February of 1946, the Congress of Industrial Organizations' (CIO) executive board launched Operation Dixie, an attempt to unionize all industry in the South. Philip Murray, the CIO president, told the board that the southern organizing effort was "the most important drive of its kind ever undertaken by any labor union in the history of this country." Such sentiments, along with reports of initial successes, were echoed in virtually every issue of the weekly *CIO News* beginning in early March 1946 and continuing for at least a year. The American Federation of Labor (AFL), the former parent and later rival of the CIO, began its own campaign to organize the South at its Southern Labor Conference held in Asheville, North Carolina, 11 and 12 May 1946. The AFL paper, *The American Federationist*, described the AFL effort as "the most intensive Southern organizing drive ever undertaken by the trade union movement."[1]

The idea of organizing the South and its critical importance both for the national strength of unions and for their long-term survival in other parts of the country was not a new one. Major statements and resolutions appear in *The American Federationist* as well as in AFL convention proceedings for decades prior to 1946. The AFL explicitly underscored the importance of the South by holding its 1928 annual national convention in New Orleans. The 1929 convention mandated a conference of all unions to begin a massive southern organizing drive. The drive was begun and regularly trumpeted by AFL President William Green and others in the pages of the 1929 and 1930 issues of the *Federationist*. The CIO likewise emphasized the importance of organizing the South. Its first convention in 1938, as an organization officially independent of the AFL, resolved to begin a southern organizing

campaign. In 1939 top CIO officials met with CIO President John L. Lewis to map plans and allocate resources.[2]

The year 1946, however, seemed to many union leaders to be an especially propitious one to launch a new, successful southern organizing campaign. Unions appeared to have good reasons to be optimistic. Trade union membership had increased from less than three million members in 1933 to more than fourteen million in 1945. Thus, the commitment of enormous attention, energies, and resources to organizing the South by both labor federations seemingly promised grand results. During World War II there had been significant union growth across the South. Industrial centers including Gadsden and Birmingham, Alabama; Laurel, Mississippi; Savannah and Atlanta, Georgia; Baton Rouge, Bogalusa, and New Orleans, Louisiana; Galveston, Texas; Memphis, Tennessee; and Tampa, Florida, had all become heavily unionized. Union organizing successes ranged across the main southern industries, including coal, metal mining, oil refining, mass transit, tobacco, pulpwood and paper, and even major textile mills in the Piedmont region. In its November 1946 issue, *Fortune Magazine*, no friend of unions, saw resistance to unions as weak and complete unionization of the South as inevitable.[3]

Significance of the Failure. Despite the devotion of substantial resources by unions and optimistic prognoses from many quarters, Operation Dixie failed abysmally.[4] Not only did unions gain few new members and locals, but most of the gains made during World War II were subsequently lost. The significance of this defeat may be viewed on several levels: first, it marked the end of the dramatic union growth that started in 1933 and the beginning of the steady decline in union density that continues through the early 1990s.[5] The 1945 high of 35 percent of the nonagricultural labor force organized into unions, although approached in 1953, has never been exceeded. In 1992, the figure stands at 15 to 16 percent; subtracting the more recently organized governmental employees, the figure for private sector workers is 10 to 11 percent, at or below the pre-depression level.

Second, the failure to organize the South marginalized the labor movement in national politics. Despite their important regional political influence in the Northeast, the upper Midwest, and to a lesser extent in California and the Northwest, unions never effectively mobilized majorities in Congress that would have overcome the combination of the Solid South and traditional Republican and business support in other areas of the coun-

try. Nowhere was this inadequacy more sharply illustrated than in the unions' inability to stop the passage of the anti-labor Taft-Hartley Act in 1947. Characterizing it as the "slave labor act," both union federations made all-out efforts to defeat it. Southern Democrats provided the margin necessary to override President Truman's veto of the act. With labor's weak legislative leverage apparent for all to see, union influence within the Democratic Party declined further; union political demands became more modest.[6]

Third, rather than being just another episode in the changing fortunes of organized labor, the inability of unions to organize the South has had even wider social and political ramifications. The failure of Operation Dixie left southern Dixiecrats and the system of white supremacy with complete social, political, and economic hegemony intact in much of the South. Successful unionization was by necessity interracial and to varying degrees anti-racist. Independent organization in the South by CIO unions—the Mine, Mill, and Smelter Workers, the United Mine Workers, the tobacco workers, the longshoremen, the maritime workers, and the packinghouse workers—often formed islands of opposition to racial discrimination and resources in the fight for equality, including, for example, campaigns against the poll tax and lynching. Successful unionization of the South would have most likely hastened the civil rights movement by many years.[7] It also would have ensured not only more extensive involvement and aid from northern unions, but also a strong reservoir of southern white working-class support, largely absent from the southern struggles of African Americans in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s. The unionization of the South had the potential to minimize the mobilization of white backlash, a central feature of post-World War II politics.

Southern racist Dixiecrat hegemony made possible South Carolinian Strom Thurmond's 1948 Dixiecrat Party presidential campaign, a movement that drew its strongest support from whites in the most heavily African-American section of the South, notably in South Carolina and Mississippi. It also made possible George Wallace's 1968 presidential campaign, based on racist-populist appeals to white backlash.[8]

These originally regional appeals, however, paved the way for the Republican Party's "southern strategy," a successful attempt to win the support of southern and other whites, many of whom were traditional Democratic voters. And, it is the failure of Operation Dixie that has allowed the Re-

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Critical Turning Points. Thus, the failure of Operation Dixie represents a critical turning point in American politics and a key to understanding the present political conjuncture. The question remains open as to what a critical turning point is and to what extent Operation Dixie actually represented one.

Most students of American political development and historical sociology recognize a number of critical turning points that have shaped American politics. Virtually everyone accepts that the Revolution-constitutional period had both an immediate and lasting impact on American politics. The same can be said for the Civil War. Though less agreement exists on most other periods, there are those who have argued for the colonial period (e.g., Morgan), Jackson's presidency (e.g., Schlesinger), Reconstruction (e.g., Du Bois), the Populist era of the 1890s (e.g., Goodwyn), the Progressive era (e.g., Skowronek), the 1960s-1970s civil rights era, and even the more recent Reagan ascendancy.[9] Many of the arguments about the importance of these periods are convincing, particularly those on the founding of the Republic and the Civil War. The current working hypothesis of this essay, however, is that the shape and structure of U.S. politics in the entire post-World War II period have been largely determined by events that happened in the 1930s and 1940s, the Great Depression-New Deal period. Thus, to understand politics and society in the United States in the 1990s, one must understand both this critical turning point and what emerged after it.

As a first cut, such a working hypothesis is not unusual. There is a common argument that traces many aspects of postwar public policy and state structure to the Roosevelt era. This argument notes the electoral realignment and the current bases of electoral support for the two major parties that can be traced to the 1930s (e.g., Sundquist). The development of social welfare policies and a "social democratic tinge" begins in this period (e.g., Hofstadter). Special importance is also attributed to the emergence of a strong centralized executive branch under President Franklin Roosevelt (e.g., Neustadt). While these factors were important, they are only part of the picture. At least as important were the channeling and dissipation of the radical politics, social movements, and labor activism of the period.[10]

The 1930s and early 1940s in the United States were a time of unusual

social and political upheaval. During the 1930s, millions protested, engaging in marches, demonstrations, and more disruptive forms of activity, more often than not under left-wing leadership. The unemployed, farmers, African Americans, students, intellectuals, retirees, and others were broadly mobilized. Workers seized their workplaces and engaged in high levels of strike activity, while union membership grew at unprecedented rates. Third-party activity, to the left of President Franklin Roosevelt, ranged from well-entrenched state parties, most notably the Minnesota Farmer-Labor Party and the Wisconsin Progressive Party, and hundreds of local ones, to the charismatic Huey Long's Share-the-Wealth movement with its millions of supporters. Radicals, predominantly Communists, were not only the leaders of many insurgent organizations, but had become an important ingredient in mainstream political considerations.[11] Although this activity played a major role in the passage of social welfare legislation and in the formation of public policy and was an important ingredient in the rising fortunes of the new Democratic Party electoral majority, what is most surprising is how little impact the 1930s radicalism and labor activism left on subsequent politics after World War II.

Various questions therefore emerge: What was the status of the labor activism and radicalism of the 1930s and early 1940s? Was it merely the more boisterous fringe of a generally liberal reforming movement, as many previous scholars have contended? Or, from the standpoint of the 1990s, were these movements, along with the liberal Democratic realignment, perhaps merely a blip on the historical screen, caused by the country's worst depression, outliers in an otherwise conservative, individualistic politics that is the true American norm? Or, alternatively, were there more radical suppressed historical possibilities presented by this period that might have emerged had circumstances been slightly different? Was a stronger, much more influential labor movement or even the formation of an electorally significant labor party possible during the 1930s and 1940s? Some think such counterfactual questions are inappropriate in historical analysis. Nevertheless, it is impossible to understand what did happen, why certain broad historical outcomes did take place, without understanding the alternatives that did not. The analysis of Max Weber in *Methodology of the Social Sciences* and the more recent work on counterfactual analysis by Jon Elster and David Lewis strongly support such an analytical research perspective.[12]

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Could Operation Dixie Have Succeeded? Even if the failure of Operation Dixie was virtually inevitable, an understanding of the circumstances would still help us comprehend post-World War II American society and politics. If it is plausible, however, to presume that the failure to organize the South during the 1930s and 1940s was not predetermined, then a careful examination of this conjecture might lead an open-minded investigator to very different conclusions about American reality.

There is a standard, commonly accepted argument that the South could not have been organized during the 1930s and 1940s. This argument stresses the concentration of industry (particularly textiles, the South's largest) in company towns dominated by an interlocking structure of factory owners, church officials, politicians, law enforcement officers, newspaper editors, and others with little concern for the democratic and constitutional rights of their opponents, particularly union organizers. In addition, commitment to the status quo and opposition to unionism, often by necessity interracial, were reinforced by a powerful system of white supremacy that dominated all other aspects of political and social life in the South.[13] Opposition to unions was strengthened by an ideological hegemony rooted in southern traditionalism. Workers themselves were imbued with conservatism, generally supporting the status quo. The predominantly agrarian background of most workers helped reinforce both submissive and highly individualistic traits, judged to be intrinsic to southern character and antithetical to union membership. Though some of these features existed in the North, there was no general parallel, so the argument goes, in other parts of the country. This explanation for the failure of unions to organize the South is put forward by, among others, Liston Pope and more recently by Barbara Griffith.[14] While this explanation has its prima facie compelling features, it is not unproblematic. Many southern industries were successfully organized during the 1930s and 1940s. These included coal mining, metal mining, oil refining, longshore and maritime, tobacco, and transportation. The question thus arises of the degree to which these industries shared the characteristics attributed to those industries where union organizing failed. If the suc-

cessful arenas of organizing were typical, then other variables must be located. Perhaps the strategies of unions and organizers were different. The main problematic is as follows: Why did the attempt to organize the South fail? Was it owing to objective circumstances, fortuitous conjunctural factors, or possibly faulty strategic plans and decisions by unions themselves? Answers to these questions are the cornerstone to understanding why U.S. politics in the post-World War II period developed as it did.

Some Working Hypotheses

One way to begin answering our questions is to examine carefully some of the hypotheses about why unions generally have had so much trouble in the South and more specifically about why Operation Dixie failed. Although many of the arguments that follow are intertwined, they have been kept distinct, at least initially, for analytic purposes.

The Southern Economy. One important and compelling set of hypotheses targets special features of the southern economy as the reasons for the difficulties of union organizing in the South. Ray Marshall, for example, argues: "There is evidence that of all the influences on union growth in the South, the most significant are economic. Legal and social forces seem to have only marginal effects." Or, in Frederic Meyers's words, "It is the usual view [to which Meyers subscribes] that the development of a stable labor movement is dependent on the development of an industrial economy." Meyers argues that southern unions remained weak because "the South [has] . . . been preindustrial."[15]

The economy of a country or region is quite clearly the place to start if one wants to understand the level of union organization there. It is incontrovertible that organization of workers requires a minimal level of industrial development and concentration of workers in large workplaces. Collective action and collective organization quite naturally require a collectivity. What level and what size are necessary, however, is not always clear. Meyers argues that Texas, because of its then recent, rapid industrial development compared to the rest of the country, was in the process of catching up in unionization rates as well.[16] There is much evidence to support this argument. Concentrated workers have more social weight and more social contact; thus, they are more likely to be organized. Workers in industrial cities, even in the

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South, tend to be more highly unionized than those in isolated areas. Workers in Louisville, Richmond, Memphis, and Norfolk-Portsmouth, for example, are not only more organized than southern workers in other locales, but they are as organized as their counterparts in many cities in the North. Studies have shown that southern textile workers, a traditionally low organized group, are more likely to be in unions if they are close to a unionized coal mine. Data consistently show that larger workplaces are more likely to be unionized than smaller ones. The South with its many small workplaces, especially in textile, mining, and lumber, its fewer industrial cities, and its lower level of industrial development would be expected to have a lower rate of unionization.[17]

A special problem faced by unions in the South was directly related to the large size and low standard of living of the agricultural population in the 1930s and 1940s. As Marjorie Potwin explained, early twentieth-century textile workers came from "three streams": tenant farmers, mountaineers, and those who already lived around the mills. A tenant family might earn on average $375 per year in 1909 and a mountain family still less. Even at meager wages paid in southern textile mills, a family of three workers could expect to receive "on the lowest earning basis, $900 per year." Thus, as Marshall concludes, "the southern farmer or mountaineer found that his lot improved considerably when he moved into a mill village." While southern workers lived poorly, worked longer hours, and were paid considerably less than their northern counterparts, they were supposedly more satisfied and less likely to want a union to represent them, since they were doing quite well by the rural, agrarian standards with which they were familiar. The poor, agrarian economy that was the experience of most workers in the South made southern workers less attracted to unions.[18]

Conversely, the declining, overpopulated southern agricultural sector made for a high level of competition among workers for those industrial jobs that were available. The existence of a surplus agricultural population meant that there was almost never a tight labor market that would force southern employers to pay higher wages. It also meant that there were greater risks at trying to organize a union. Workers identified as trouble-makers could easily be replaced. When they went on strike there was always an abundant supply of strikebreakers from rural areas without the work-place experience that might have led them to join the strikers. The agrarian economy thus made it more difficult for workers to gain the leverage that

they needed to organize, even if they had so desired. These problems were especially accentuated in industries such as textiles where skill levels for most of the work were low. In certain industries, where the skill level was high, as on railroads and in construction, workers could organize more easily since the barriers to entry from unskilled agricultural labor provided protection from competitors and most strikebreakers.[19]

The South, as a less developed region of the country, also suffered because of the type of industries that existed there. Marshall, among others, argues that the composition of southern industry is one of the reasons for the low level of unionization: "It is therefore clear that one of the reasons for the South's low proportion of unionization is the concentration of that region's employment in industries which are not well organized." Oligopolistic, capital-intensive firms, according to this argument, can afford to allow their employees to unionize. Southern industries were disproportionately extractive, labor intensive, and organized in large numbers of highly competitive firms. With low skill levels and often low start-up costs, union recognition and the increased costs of better conditions and wages for employees might easily drive a company out of business.[20]

An additional proof of the importance of the economy for southern union organizing may be seen in looking at the effects of the business cycle. For much of the twentieth century, many southern industries have been in a state of crisis, in part caused by international competition, but also by the domestic overproduction that often results from highly competitive industries with low barriers to entry. During periods of high economic activity, however, much successful organizing took place in the South. During the World War I boom, for example, extensive union growth occurred in key southern industries, such as tobacco, coal and iron ore mining, steel production, timber, and especially cotton textile. In the last industry, workers in major North Carolina textile centers, including Charlotte, Rock Hill, Huntersville, Concord, and Kannapolis (all places where CIO organizers failed during Operation Dixie) were highly organized in militant unions. As H. M. Douty concludes, "Clearly, a fairly extensive labor movement existed in the South during the World War I period." Much of this union organization collapsed in the early twenties with the onset of the post-World War I recession, as it did in other parts of the country as well. Douty implies, however, that some of the destruction of union organization took place

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because of poor tactical leadership, including the calling of ill-advised strikes, where workers had almost no leverage over their employers, who could not sell their current finished products in saturated, depressed markets. Frank deVyver argues that a similar upsurge in union membership took place from 1938 to 1948: "The upswing of the business cycle and the wartime economy have made gains in union membership almost inevitable, for during such periods workers feel the need for help to meet higher prices, and employers are able to grant wage increases and fringe demands more readily than at other times in the economic cycle. Thus unions are able to get something for the workers and the membership increases." During World War II, the labor market was especially tight, even in the South. Millions of potential employees were in the armed forces, while industrial production reached unprecedented levels. Not only did many southerners leave their farms, but southern workers also quit their jobs. Both groups sought, not primarily better jobs in southern industry, but the higher paying industrial jobs of the North. Southern industry had to compete for workers, no longer having the ready surplus labor force to which it was accustomed. Industries were also under pressure from the federal government to settle labor disputes quickly so as not to interrupt war production.[21]

It is clear that economic factors play a critical role in determining the level and possibilities of union organization. In certain circumstances they can prove more decisive than extreme government and employer opposition. Recent unionization in South Korea and among African workers in South Africa may plausibly be attributed to rapid industrial expansion during the 1970s and 1980s. Unions, however, have formed in many places, at very early stages of industrial development. They have also lost members or been inhibited at high levels of industrial development as in the United States today. Thus, despite the central importance of economic development, other factors may also play a determining role.

Union-Resistant Attitudes of Southern Workers and Southern Culture. Perhaps the most popular hypothesis for the difficulties of unions in the South points to aspects of southern culture and the character of southern workers. While there are clearly many Souths and many large variations in southern culture, from New Orleans to Birmingham and from the Delta to the hill country of Tennessee and North Carolina, it is also clear that there exist certain distinctive features of the South as a whole.

Patterns of speech, food, and music (from blues and spirituals to bluegrass), strains of Protestant religious fundamentalism, and a warmer climate are easily recognizable as southern. Their political import, however, is less clear. Other factors, including the relative ethnic homogeneity of the white population, the large historic percentage of African Americans, the heritage of black slavery and the plantation economy, the intensity and pervasiveness of the long-standing system of white supremacy, the violence and assertiveness of many southerners, and the defeat by the North in the Civil War, have political ramifications. The question, however, is not whether the South is different, but the degree to which its distinctive culture has held back the development of union organization.

Most commentators have answered that southern culture has been a major impediment to union organization in the South. They focus in particular on many traits that they ascribe to white southerners as a group; sometimes they include African-American southerners in these characterizations. There are many characteristics that are supposedly identifiable as central to southern character, all of which make union organization difficult, unlikely, or impossible. First, the heritage of the plantation system, with a large percentage of the population having roots as sharecroppers and tenant farmers, has supposedly left an ingrained psychological stance of docility, submissiveness, and acceptance of paternalistic relations.[22]

As Liston Pope argues in his classic case study of the 1929 Gastonia, North Carolina, textile strike, "The labor supply was also notable for its docility. This trait has been overemphasized by chambers of commerce and power companies seeking to attract Northern capital to Southern communities. . . . The first generation of workers appears to have been . . . patient and long-suffering in spirit. . . . They had been accustomed to working from sunrise to sunset without murmuring, and to expect little in return. They took it for granted that all members of the family would work as early as possible, and offered practically no opposition to child labor in the cotton mills."[23]

Joseph McDonald and Donald Clelland, in an analysis of attitudinal data among contemporary southern textile workers, write: "The analysis suggests that these textile workers remain affected by the paternalistic ideology, even if paternalistic practices themselves have changed ([Jeffery] Leiter, [Richard] Simpson), and that the deference felt toward management authority does reduce support for unions. We believe that the peripherality

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Robert Blauner, writing in a different academic language, talks of the submissiveness and complacency of southern textile workers: "Workers with traditional orientations do not value control and self-expression as much as do modern industrial workers." And, in a stereotypic male chauvinist analysis: "The submissiveness required of male textile workers must be damaging to the maintenance of a sure sense of masculinity," a submissiveness, Blauner finds, that comes more naturally to female textile workers. Second, there is supposedly an attitude of extreme individualism and explosive violence, usually directed at other poor people—whites against other whites, blacks against blacks, oftentimes white violence directed against blacks. This individualism allegedly makes it difficult or unlikely that southern workers will organize collectively, except for the shortest outbursts of angry protest. Sustained cooperative behavior is supposedly alien.[25]

Liston Pope writes: "The workers brought with them to the mill villages an individualism nurtured by solitary life on small farms and sparsely populated mountainsides; this individualism resulted, in the sphere of industrial relations, in personal dealings as individuals with the employer, with collective labor action appearing only sporadically and always being short-lived. The early manufacturers, lacking capital and depending heavily on uninterrupted production in order to remain solvent, had available a labor supply largely unamenable to outside influences interested in the organization of labor."[26]

Writing in the November 1928 issue of *American Federationist*, George Googe, the top AFL official in the South argued, "The native Southerners of the small towns and country communities are traditionally independent in their own estimation, believing themselves sufficiently capable individually to take care of their own interests, and feeling that it is an admission of weakness to call upon their fellow workers for assistance or concerted action." Further, "The problem confronting the organizing of workers in the South is vastly different from that of any other section. The type of the native worker, his environment, mental attitude and traditions tend to create extreme lethargy towards his own betterment, particularly relative to activity in the labor movement."[27]

Or in the words of Irving Bernstein, the noted historian of labor in the

1920s and 1930s, "His rural tradition, his ingrained individualism, his ignorance, his isolation, his restless mobility, his apathy, his poverty, his suspicions of northerners joined to impede his capacity to act collectively" and helped to defeat the textile strikes of 1929.[28]

Third, an ingrained social conservatism is supposedly endemic, stemming from an intense patriotism—involving both the nation as a whole and the South in particular—and deep religiosity. This conservatism is tied to the ever-present duty to accept and defend the prevailing system of white supremacy and the previously discussed acceptance of hierarchical and paternalistic social, political, and economic relations.

With regard to the textile revolt in 1929, the renowned historian of the South, George Brown Tindall, states, "The rebellion of 1929 revealed new elements in the southern industrial pattern, but highlighted the prevalence of the old. If southern workers had grown mutinous at class subordination, poverty, and the stretch-out amid prosperity hoopla, they remained close to their native culture. 'At the core of the Southern mill workers' outlook on life,' Paul Blanshard found, 'are the Sunday School, the Star Spangled Banner, and personal friendship for the boss.' . . . He seized upon the union as an instrument of immediate protest rather than as an agency for long-range collective bargaining."[29]

And in a more general discussion of southern working-class values, Ray Marshall ties them to the predominant agrarian economy: "The abundance of low-income agricultural workers in the South has been a great obstacle to union growth. Not only have the workers frequently been willing to break strikes in order to escape their poor conditions, but they were also likely to be satisfied with their manufacturing jobs, removing the element of discontent which is usually a prerequisite to union organization. In addition, they generally have the values of rural people which precludes interest in or sympathy for unions."[30]

All the above aspects of the argument on southern values and culture are expressed in W. J. Cash's influential work, *The Mind of the South.* This book was often recommended reading by CIO southern leaders, particularly for their northern colleagues attempting to organize unions in the South. Cash stresses all the themes that we have so far mentioned. He has an impressionistic style, often insightful, sometimes woefully wrong and ignorant. On the latter, he asserts, for example, that the 1929 strikes were "the first serious labor revolt the South had ever known," thus displaying his ignorance not only of the extensive a
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rance not only of the extensive activity of the Knights of Labor organizing in the late nineteenth century and the mine workers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, but also of the high degree of organizing in the textile industry in the 1915–1921 period—a fact of which George Googe, for example, is pointedly aware. Cash, throughout his book, describes the intense individualism of southern workers, often with great insight. He explains the 1929 strikes, however, as follows: "And in fact most of the strikes were inspired by such grievances and had the character of unstudied mass action rather than of unionism. In most cases the union not only collapsed once the strike was lost but numbered no more than a negligible fraction of workers in the mill until the strike had actually begun." Cash viewed southern workers as incapable of preparing for a strike or even of paying regular union dues. "And as for winning a strike—they hadn't a chance. So much follows from what I have said, from the lack of coherent organization and the absence of a war chest. It followed, too, from the very carelessness of their psychology—from their willingness, once they had discharged their irritations, had their lark, and begun to get hungry, to drift cheerfully back to work, regardless of the fact that even their immediate aim had not been accomplished."[31]

Finally, in a point that will be discussed in more detail later, there is the whole system of white supremacy fostering white chauvinist attitudes among white workers. These attitudes become easily directed against unions, which represent at least in principle an integrationist egalitarianism of all workers, sometimes portrayed as originating in the North in order to undermine the values of the South—God, family, flag, and ethnic purity.

Unified Opposition to Unions. Other writers have stressed, in contrast to or in addition to the above causes, the high degree of integrated control over workers by those opposed to unions. This unified opposition had a number of dimensions, few of which supposedly existed in the North, at least to the same degree. Anti-union hegemony begins with the textile villages, where the company owned the streets, the houses where workers lived, and the stores where they shopped. Troublemakers and union sympathizers, thus, were not merely fired, but evicted from their houses and even occasionally arrested for trespassing in the company town.

There was also an extremely close integration of economic, political, social, and cultural power in parts of the South. Many sheriffs and law

enforcement personnel were without even the nominal show of independence from local capitalists, in part a heritage from the plantation era. In some places no pretense was made of respecting the civil liberties of union organizers or pro-union workers, who often received violent punishment for their defiance, including tarring and feathering, lynching, and murder, sometimes with the open complicity of law enforcement officials. The judicial system generally served to exonerate perpetrators of crimes committed against union supporters, while often charging and sometimes even convicting the victims themselves of crimes that were in many cases preposterous. Not merely law enforcement but other aspects of southern life were either under the close control of or acted to serve southern capitalists. There was a close integration of ministers, the press, and all other aspects of life. This intense opposition to unions was fed by the insecurity that mill owners sometimes felt in trying to make profits in a highly competitive, labor intensive industry.[32]

Weakness of Union Leadership. Despite all of these problems, some industries and unions organized successfully. Coal miners living in company towns, working for small, decentralized, highly competitive companies, often faced opposition as intense as those in textile mill towns; metal miners, predominantly white oil workers, integrated maritime and dock workers, and others formed unions successfully during the 1930s and 1940s. Thus, some commentators have concluded that it was not the external conditions that hindered the unionization of southern workers but the leaders and organizations themselves.

The various textile workers unions have most often been the object of criticism. Barbara Griffith quotes Jim Pierce, a southern-born, nonradical official of the Communication Workers of America, who voiced a sharp indictment of the CIO Textile Workers Union: "The Textile Workers could never decide to do anything, or how to do it, and still can't. Back and forth, back and forth. They get militant for a few days; then somebody hits them and they slump back. That has its effect on people. Union representatives can only be really good if they've got good strong unions to back them up. And they didn't have it in textiles." Dennis Nolan and Donald Jonas argue that a consistent pattern of incompetence existed among textile unions from 1901 to 1932. They accuse the AFL United Textile Workers Union of "an almost unbelievable tactical ineptness." They see a history of intense, disruptive factionalism, conservatism, and lack of militancy by northern

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business union leaders, failures to understand the intensity of the opposition to unions by southern textile mill owners, and a general unwillingness to give concrete support, particularly money and organizers, to even the most promising southern efforts: "It is hard to avoid the conclusion that whatever the strength of outside forces, the workers and their organizers were often their own worst enemies. Time and again, burgeoning union movements were crushed by poor preparation, lack of strategy, internal divisions, inept leadership, and refusal of those with a stake in the dispute (especially northern textile unions and the AFL) to support the striking workers."[33]

The most incisive and far-ranging argument that focuses on the character of unions is that of William Regensburger, who argues that the only successful industrial unions were those either led by Communists and other left-wingers or those with a strong left-wing faction that contributed disproportionately to union organizing. According to Regensburger the unions that succeeded in the South had a number of characteristics that distinguished them from those that failed. First, the radical organizers emphasized broad class issues and instilled a long-term perspective on the struggle of workers against their employers. Thus, when major strikes failed, as they did at one time or another in all the successfully unionized industries in the South, organizers and radical workers did not fold up shop. They kept workers actively organized, engaging them in in-plant job actions, telling them that defeats were normal in a long struggle. More conservative unions generally disappeared once they were defeated in a major strike. Second, radical organizers, particularly the Communists, pushed hard on the question of racial equality in their work among whites. Conservatives, whether the right-wingers in the AFL or the centrist figures in the CIO, like those in charge of Operation Dixie, tended to downplay questions of racial egalitarianism. Such activities gained them little since the southern press and the companies accused even conservative unionists of integrationist and communist sympathies. Third, radical organizers were usually not afraid to make direct appeals to African-American workers and openly defend their demands for equal rights. They did not hesitate to organize the majority of black workers first, whereas most conservative and liberal unionists often believed that it was necessary initially to go after the white workers first if one was to have a viable union, thus often failing to gain as strong support from the initially more pro-union African-American workers. Regensburger

argues that these approaches were the main determinants of success or failure in southern organizing.[34]

An issue raised by Regensburger's argument and much disputed in the literature is whether radical organizers were a liability in the conservative South or a boon. This question must figure prominently in the evaluation of the hypothesis about the degree of responsibility of union leaders for the failure of Operation Dixie.[35]

Tentative Conclusions and Open Questions

In the endeavor to answer these questions and evaluate the foregoing hypotheses the following strategy will be applied: First, it is impossible to look at one industry by itself during one period and begin to understand the reasons why a union might have been successful or unsuccessful there. As most social scientists well know at least in the abstract, a one-shot case study rarely leads to convincing generalizations. Thus, those situations in which unions failed will be compared with others where they succeeded. This comparison is done across industries during the 1930s and 1940s in the North as well as in the South, and historically across the South; particular attention is focused on those examples of relatively successful organizing. The objective is to evaluate to what degree the failures in the 1930s and 1940s, especially those during the Operation Dixie campaign, resulted from some or all of the four reasons discussed above. The evaluation is based generally on a wide reading of the secondary literature on southern labor organizing. In addition, it is based on archival research on Operation Dixie and other union activities in the South during the 1930s and 1940s. Also brought to bear are various statistical measures, including detailed strike and economic data for the South. The goal is to understand what happened and what was the range of political possibilities generally in the 1930s and 1940s, particularly if the South could have been organized. Specifically, an effort will be made to pinpoint what factors would have had to have been different to have allowed this organization to occur. Offered here are merely some preliminary conclusions and questions:

1. While one should not underestimate the competitive economic pressures on textile mill owners nor the degree of repression against unions in textile mill towns, the situation was not in principle different from that

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faced by southern and Appalachian coal miners. While there are crucial variations, the parallels among the numerous failed southern strikes, the violence and brutality, which were if anything worse for coal miners, and the long-standing successful organization of the northern wings of both industries (Illinois and Pennsylvania in coal) are instructive. Although textile workers have not traditionally been the first organized or necessarily the most militant, in South Korea, czarist Russia, and in a wide variety of circumstances worldwide throughout modern history, they have not proved to be unorganizable. While the circumstances of southern textile workers in the 1930s and the 1940s presented difficult obstacles to overcome, there seems to be no reason to assume that the repression or the economics of the industry were such as to preclude their unionization. An even more puzzling industry, timber and lumber, had an integrated workforce with little hierarchical division of labor and job categorization, in contrast, for example, to the racially based job hierarchies in tobacco. The "objective situation" made the timber and lumber industry seem ripe for organization, yet no major attempts were made as in textiles; workers themselves seemed to give little indication that they were ready for unions. But the same industry in the Northwest was militant and well-organized during the 1930s and 1940s. Many southern timber workers had been organized from 1910 to 1913 under the radical leadership of the Industrial Workers of the World. Textiles similarly had seemed organizable during the economic booms surrounding the two world wars. Understanding these two industries, the two largest in terms of employment in the South during the 1930s and 1940s, is critical. In contrast, certain unions had completely organized their southern jurisdictions during this period: the United Mine Workers (1934), the Mine, Mill and Smelter Workers (1938), the United Steel Workers (1939), the National Maritime Union (1940), and the Oil Workers International Union (1941). Also noteworthy are the strong inroads made in the tobacco industry by the Food, Tobacco, Agricultural and Allied Workers, and in southern meatpacking by the United Packinghouse Workers—two unions characterized by strong anti-discrimination policies. Were these successes aberrations or possibilities that others might have emulated?

2. Although it is clear that questions of culture, group and ethnic identity, group history particularly in struggle, and regional character are significant and cannot be ignored, it is important to register skepticism about whether these factors are usually able to determine that a group will not be

unionized once it becomes employed in large-scale modern industry. There is a long history of pronouncing certain types of workers as unorganizable during times when they were, in fact, not organized. A long tradition in this country, now recognizable as white chauvinist, pronounced African Americans as submissive, too tied to the bosses, unable or unwilling to express solidarity, and more likely candidates to be strikebreakers rather than reliable union members. Today, as in the 1930s and 1940s, African-American workers have tended to be more solidaristic and union conscious than similarly placed white workers by a wide variety of indicators. A more penetrating analysis of earlier periods would show that the more traditional interpretation was unattuned to the degree of discrimination and exclusion faced by African Americans both within industry and from unions.[36]

Additional perspective may be gained by studying the tobacco industry. Prior to the 1930s, its workers seemed more impervious to unions than those in textile. As Herbert Northrup notes, "In few industries have conditions been so unfavorable to organized labor as in the tobacco industry." Northrup cites the rapid automation that displaced most of the skilled workers and the concentration of the industry in a few concerns, most of which were strongly anti-union and located in the South. He also argues, "But more important has been the racial division in the ranks of labor. The jobs are divided almost evenly between whites and Negroes, who are, however, sharply segregated on the basis of a racial occupational division. In addition, more than one-half of the workers of each race are women, a fact which, when coupled with the racial division and southern mores, makes the task of labor organizations most difficult." The final hindrance was the "timid and inept leaders" of the AFL Tobacco Workers International Union. Beginning in 1933, insurgents within the union began to organize workers in the industry, eventually removing the old leadership of the union in a bitter, lengthy struggle. By 1941, tobacco workers were no longer thought to be unorganizable.[37]

Moving northward, Morris Hillquit describes the perception of Jewish cloak workers by Socialist and union organizers in 1910:

> Practically all were recent immigrants, prevalently Jews from Russia, Austria, and Romania with a sprinkling of Italians and other nationalities. Their pay was miserable, their work h
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Like most Jewish workers they were long-suffering, meek, and submissive. But every once in a while they would flare up in an outburst of despair and revolt, and go on strike. The strikes were spontaneous and without preparation or organization. . . .

The cloak workers were long the despair of professional and union organizers, including my own circle of young Social propagandists. They seemed hopelessly unorganizable on a permanent basis.

The change came in 1910.[38]

The Jewish cloak workers eventually became the most staunch and disciplined of union supporters and a bastion of support for Socialist and Communist politics. The descriptions of their docility and resistance to unionization, however, are not unlike those of southern mill workers. Jews were not the only immigrants thought to be unorganizable. Similar claims were later made about eastern European immigrants during the Great Steel Strike of 1919, although these workers acquitted themselves more admirably than most at the time.

Casting the net a bit wider, it may be instructive to look at the convincing, sometimes eloquent, arguments given by scholars before 1960 as to why governmental employees could not be organized into unions. They were white collar, too professionally minded; their strikes were illegal and harshly punished; they had job security unavailable to private sector workers; strikes against the government had no public sympathy; and so on.[39] Government employees are today among the most militant, highly organized of U.S. workers, approximately 40 percent unionized. Thus, it should be clear that explanations about why a group is unlikely to form unions, based largely on the fact that they are not at the time organized, as government employees were not prior to 1960, should be treated with some degree of care. Similarly, before the 1960s, many scholars believed that women were less likely to join unions. A typical remark from the industrial relations literature is that of Jack Barbash who writes, "Women workers, with notable exceptions, are not the material out of which strong unions are typically built." In retrospect it is easy to see that such assessments were based on stereotypes and prejudice, as events such as the militant struggles of women schoolteachers and of female factory workers

including those at the Watsonville Cannery (California) in the 1980s have shown.[40]

Finally, a reading of oral history interviews of southern union activists and radicals suggests that many of the traits that are sometimes described as too individualist to foster collective behavior were oftentimes seen by the workers themselves as the basis for their decision to become union activists or even Communists. Regensburger convincingly argues that "southern values of individualism, family, home, personal honor, independence, and violence were blended into an explosive mixture of working class militancy." One interview quotes a former southern left-wing organizer, "See, you gotta understand, southern workers aren't harder to organize. When we start a rumpus, it's a real rumpus! When we say somethin', we mean what we say." Another of Regensburger's interviewees tells him, "A man who won't fight for his rights is no good. He's no good to his family. He's no good to his children."[41]

3. Anyone examining the role of different types of union leaderships and organizers must take seriously the argument presented by William Regensburger. He describes the successful strategies and the audaciousness of radical organizers. An interesting case is that of the Oil Workers, who initially had little success in their southern organizing during the 1930s. Then they were incorporated by the CIO into a broader Oil Workers Organizing Committee (OWOC). Left-winger Edwin Smith, former chair of the National Labor Relations Board, was placed in charge of OWOC by the CIO. Smith appointed a number of experienced Communists and other leftists as organizers and mid-level staff. Through a series of dynamic campaigns with broad support from a number of other unions, including the left-wing National Maritime Union, OWOC began to organize the bulk of the southern oil industry.[42]

The history of southern organizing, not only of the early AFL unions, but also of the tactics of much of Operation Dixie, often seems a long list of missed opportunities and excuses. One is struck in reading through the Operation Dixie Collection by the narrowness and lack of dynamism of many of the Operation Dixie leaders, certainly those at the top, Van Bittner, George Baldanzi, and John Riffe. Griffith describes Bittner as "something more of a trade union functionary than a labor activist," but this assessment is far too charitable. Even the harsher descriptions she reports by others seem not to do Bittner justice.[43] He was an old-fashioned time-server

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from John L. Lewis's mine workers. His only talent seemed to be his terrible vindictiveness not only toward Communists, but toward anyone who was extremely militant, particularly those who had defied the Lewis leadership. Van Bittner played an important role, for example, in 1931 in red-baiting and attempting to smear Frank Keeney, a rank-and-file leader of UMW District 17 in West Virginia. All the while in Bittner's correspondence, in which he often complains vociferously about those to his left, he tells his friends and subordinates that he has a long reputation opposing red-baiting. Bittner not only attempts to keep all left-wing organizers off the Operation Dixie staff, supposedly to keep the campaign from being red-baited, which happened anyway, but he insists that staff members break ties with all "outside" organizations, including the CIO Political Action Committee (PAC). Rather than enlisting broad support for Operation Dixie, on 18 April 1946, Bittner publicly denounces a rally in support of the drive, called in New York by left-wing groups to raise money and other aid.

Bittner's correspondence is filled with moralisms about organizing local unions, how Operation Dixie does not discriminate by color or any other criterion, and the importance of working hard, among others. He seems at his most vigorous, however, in demanding that there be no exceptions during organizing campaigns to collecting the one dollar initiation fee from prospective members. He spends much energy castigating state directors who ask for permission to overlook the rule in exceptional cases. Waiving of initiation fees, of course, was common in successful campaigns, particularly where there had been previous unsuccessful organizing and workers remained skeptical. One cannot help but feel that placing Bittner in charge of earlier major CIO drives, North or South, would have ensured their failure as well.[44]

Bittner and his subordinates presided over the assembling of a largely southern, inexperienced, unpolitical staff. Although it is difficult to evaluate degree of commitment and amount of work (and it appears from correspondence and organizers' reports that most staff tried hard and meant well), one is struck by complaints even from Bittner about organizers not wanting to work weekends or to put in the extra efforts so often required in critical organizing drives.[45]

The major textile campaigns of Operation Dixie seem to be stamped with a lack of audacity compared to successful campaigns in the past, North or South. Most significant, and a point worth exploring at length in the future,

are the hesitancies on the race question, compared to the more successful southern drives. Operation Dixie in many ways seems to follow the lead of the early AFL rather than the newer tactics used so fruitfully by the CIO. Like AFL President William Green's 1929–1930 tour of the South and many speeches to chambers of commerce, Bittner and his associates seem to rely too heavily on creating goodwill with southern elites. Thus, it is hard not to be hesitant in sharing Barbara Griffith's conclusion: "Had the South been organizable through sheer will and effort, the CIO staff of 1946 possessed enough of these qualities to have succeeded. One comes away from a prolonged study of the people and events that formed the day-to-day life of Operation Dixie with the settled feeling that the men and women of the CIO cared enough, and tried hard enough. But more than will was required."[46]

4. The Communists were not without blame in the failures of the 1930s and 1940s, but their problems were not in general those ascribed to them. They probably were, for example, no more manipulative than other organizers in the labor movement and a good deal less so than some, including a number to their right. The unions that they led were often, perhaps by necessity, more democratic than some of the right-wing unions.[47]

5. Another question to be examined is the impact of the peculiar nature of the New Deal-Democratic Party coalition on southern organizing. The Democratic Party included left-wing CIO unions and southern conservatives as well as advocates of lynching and the potential lynchees. The southern Democratic congressional contingent had grown more conservative by the end of World War II.[48] Roosevelt had unsuccessfully tried to defeat a number of conservative southern Democrats in the 1938 election. After his failure, political expediency demanded that he mend his fences. Did the subordination of all wings of the CIO, including the Communists, to the Democratic Party hamper it from fully confronting Dixiecrat opposition to unions in the South?[49] In 1936, a number of strong state-level parties existed, including the Wisconsin Progressive Party and the Minnesota Farmer-Labor Party, which controlled the governorship and a majority of the congressional delegation. There were also perhaps hundreds of local labor parties of major importance. Why did the CIO abandon these efforts in favor of the Democrats? Was it necessary to subordinate themselves totally to the New Deal coalition?

6. Finally, to what extent was the "civil war" between the AFL and the

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CIO responsible for the failure of Operation Dixie? What role did the conflict between conservative and moderate CIO leaders and Communists play in the defeat of southern industrial organizing?

It is along these lines that some of the hidden structure of contemporary American politics will be discovered.