



The Free Congress Commentary

The Next Conservatism #36: The Next Conservatism and Labor

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Over the past half-century, labor union presence in American life has declined greatly. In the 1940s only one union, John L. Lewis's United Mine Workers of America, could and did hold hostage the whole country. Today only some 12% of American workers are union members.

Most conservatives see this as a good thing, and in some ways it is. But as I have argued in this series of columns on the next conservatism, conservatives should not be against American workers. Most of the people who work in manufacturing are cultural conservatives.

Moreover, the kind of country we desire only can exist if average people have jobs which pay a family wage, enough that the husband can give his family a middle-class standard of living on one paycheck so his wife can stay home with the children. That usually requires a job in industry, in a factory that manufactures. The free-trade policies which have shipped so many manufacturing jobs overseas also have exported many Americans' way of life.

From this perspective, I want to suggest the next conservatism take a somewhat different position on labor, one that reflects today's situation, not yesterday's. We should be pro-labor, in the sense of pro-worker, not of course pro-union leadership. We should stand up

for American private-sector workers and their most vital interest, manufacturing jobs that pay a middle-class wage.

Further, we should be willing to work with some unions, unions that actually stand for their members' economic interests. We have a political opportunity here. The leadership of most of the big unions could care less about American workers. They use their compulsory dues to support all kinds of radical, Politically Correct causes that most of their members oppose. But on issues that affect their members' jobs, like free trade, they go along with the Washington Establishment. They are completely out of touch with their base.

As in other aspects of the next conservatism, bigness is an issue here. In my view, we should favor smaller unions that are still in touch with their members and represent their actual economic interests. Again, we should be willing to work with those unions.

How do we get there, given that the big unions dominate? In my view, the next conservatism should include a plan for "trust-busting unions," to go after the big unions that sell out their members. Specifics of such union trust-busting could include:

- Enforcing regulations that are already on the books to require much more transparency in union expenditures. If the big unions' members could see the kinds of radical causes to which their money goes, they would demand changes or form new unions.
- Inform union members of the Beck decision, which ruled that union members were not obligated to pay dues that are used for causes unrelated to workers' interests.
- Eliminate all requirements for compulsory unionism, so unions actually represent workers if they expect workers to join them.

All of this goes only for unions that represent workers in private industries. Public sector workers' unions are another matter. Not only are many of those union leaders deeply into the cultural Marxism of Political Correctness, so in some cases are their members. In their case, we need to continue to be wary. They can and do still hold the country hostage, or at least parts of it, as we saw in the recent, illegal New York City transit workers' strike. We need to make it clear that public employees have no right to strike. After all, their wages are paid by our taxes. When they strike they are biting the hand that feeds them.

In sum, I am suggesting the next conservatism see labor and unions as differentiated rather than as all the same. Labor, in the form of unions that represent workers' real economic interests like good manufacturing jobs, should not be seen as an opponent. On the contrary, it is a potential ally, at least on some issues. The leadership of the big unions, detached as it is from member interests and devoted to radical politics, remains an opponent, as do many public sector unions. There, some trust-busting is in order.

As the next conservatism should favor small scale in business and in agriculture it should favor small scale in unions as well. Small scale means local control, and real life is local.

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