Bayard Rustin

THE BLACKS AND THE UNIONS

Which way will the blacks choose—to fight to eliminate all segregation in the trade unions, or to become pawns in the conservatives' games of bust-the-unions?

One of the main articles of faith in liberal dogma these days is that the interests and objectives of the American trade-union movement are in fundamental conflict with the interests and objectives of black America. One can hardly pick up any of the major journals of liberal opinion without reading some form of the statement that the white worker has become affluent and conservative and feels his security to be threatened by the demand for racial equality. A corollary of this statement is that it is a primary function of the labor movement to protect the white worker from the encroaching black. Furthermore, the argument runs, since there are no signs that the blacks may be letting up in their struggle for economic betterment, a hostile confrontation between blacks and the unions is not only inevitable but necessary.

It may well be that historians of the future, recording the events of the past five years, will conclude that the major effect of the civic turbulence in this period has been in fact to distract us from the real and pressing social needs of the nation. And perhaps nothing illustrates the point more vividly than the whole question of the relations between blacks and the unions.

This question itself, however, cannot be properly understood except in the larger context of the history of the civil-rights movement. Negro protest in the Sixties, if the movement is in its turn to be properly understood, must be divided into two distinct phases. The first phase, which covered something like the first half of the decade, was one in which the movement's clear objective was to destroy the legal foundations of racism in America. Thus the locale of the struggle was the South, the evil to be eliminated was Jim Crow, and the enemy, who had a special talent for arousing moral outrage among even the most reluctant sympathizers with the cause, was the rock-willed segregationist.

Now, one thing about the South more than any other has been obscured in the romantic vision of the region—of ancient evil, of defeat, of enduring rural charm—that has been so much of our literary and intellectual tradition: for the Negro, Southern life had precisely a quality of clarity, a clarity which while oppressive was also supportive. The Southern caste system and folk culture rested upon a clear, albeit unjust, set of legal and institutional relationships which prescribed roles for individuals and established a modicum of social order. The struggle that was finally mounted against that system was actually fed and strengthened by the social environment from which it emerged. No profound analysis, no overriding social theory was needed in order both to locate and understand the injustices that were to be combated. All that was demanded of one was sufficient courage to demonstrate against them. One looks back upon this period in the civil-rights movement with nostalgia.

During the second half of the Sixties, the center of the crisis shifted to the sprawling ghettos of the North. Here black experience was radically different from that in the South. The stability of institutional relationships was largely absent in Northern ghettos, especially among the poor. Over twenty years ago, the black sociologist E. Franklin Frazier was able to see the brutalizing effect of urbanization upon lower-class blacks: "...the bonds of sympathy and community of interests that held their parents together in the rural environment have been unable to withstand the disintegrating forces in the city." Southern blacks migrated north in search of work, seeking to become transformed from a peasantry into a working class. But instead of jobs they found only misery, and far from becoming a proletariat, they came to constitute a Lumpenproletariat, an underclass of rejected people. Frazier's prophetic words resound today with terrifying precision: "...as long as the bankrupt system of Southern agriculture exists, Negro families will continue to seek a living in the towns and cities of the country. They will crowd the slum areas of Southern cities or make their way to Northern cities, where their family life will become disrupted and their poverty will force them to depend upon charity."

Out of such conditions, social protest was to emerge in a form peculiar to the ghetto, a form which could never have taken root in the South except in such large cities as Atlanta or Houston. The evils in the North are not easy to understand and fight against, or at least not as easy as Jim Crow, and this has given the protest from the ghetto a special edge of frustration. There are few specific
injustices, such as a segregated lunch counter, that offer both a clear object of protest and a good chance of victory. Indeed, the problem in the North is not one of social injustice so much as the results of institutional pathology. Each of the various institutions touching the lives of urban blacks—those relating to education, health, employment, housing, and crime—is in need of drastic reform. One might say that the Northern race problem has in good part become simply the problem of the American city—which is gradually becoming a reservation for the unwanted, most of whom are black.

In such a situation, even progress has proved to be a mixed blessing. During the Sixties, for example, Northern blacks as a group have made great economic gains, the result of which being that hundreds of thousands of them were able to move out of the hard-core poverty areas. Meanwhile, however, their departure, while a great boon to those departing, only contributed further to the deterioration of the slums, now being drained of their stable middle and working class. Combined with the large influx of Southern blacks during the same period, this process was leaving the ghetto more and more the precinct of a depressed underclass. To the segregation by race was now added segregation by class, and all of the problems created by segregation and poverty—inadequate schooling, substandard and overcrowded housing, lack of access to jobs or to job training, narcotics and crime—were greatly aggravated. And again because of segregation, the violence of the black underclass was turned in upon itself.

If the problems of the ghetto do not lend themselves to simple analyses or solutions, then, this is because they cannot be solved without mounting a total attack on the inadequacies endemic to, and injustices embedded in, all of our institutions. It is perhaps understandable that young Northern blacks, confronting these problems, have so often provided answers which are really non-answers; which are really dramatic statements satisfying some sense of the need for militancy without even beginning to deal with the basic economic and political problems of the ghetto. Primary among these non-answers is the idea that black progress depends upon a politics of race and revolution. I am referring here not to the recent assertions of black pride—assertions that will be made as long as that pride continues to be undermined by white society—but to the kind of black nationalism which consists in a bitter rejection of American society and vindicates a withdrawal from social struggle into a kind of hermetic racial world where blacks can "do their thing." Nationalists have been dubbed "militants" by the press because they have made their point with such fervent hostility to white society, but the implication of their position actually amounts to little more than the age-old conservative message that blacks should help themselves—a thing that, by the very definition of the situation, they have not the resources to do.
The same is true of black proposals for revolution. For to engage in revolutionary acts in contemporary America—where, despite a lot of inflammatory rhetoric, there is not even a whisper of a revolutionary situation—not only diverts precious energies away from the political arena where the real battles for change must be fought, but might also precipitate a vicious counterrevolution the chief victims of which will be blacks.

The truth about the situation of the Negro today is that there are powerful forces, composed largely of the corporate elite and Southern conservatives, which will resist any change in the economic or racial structure of this country that might cut into their resources or challenge their status; and such is precisely what any program genuinely geared to improve his lot must do. Moreover, these forces today are not merely resisting change. With their representative Richard Nixon in the White House, they are engaged in an assault on the advances made during the past decade. It has been Nixon's tragic and irresponsible choice to play at the politics of race, not, to be sure, with the primitive demagoguery of a "Pitchfork Ben" Tillman, say, but nevertheless with the same intent of building a political majority on the basis of white hostility to blacks. So far he has been unsuccessful, but the potential for the emergence of such a reactionary majority does exist, especially if the turbulence and racial polarization which we have recently experienced persists.

What is needed, therefore, is not only a program that would effect some fundamental change in the distribution of America's resources for those in the greatest need of them, but also a political majority that will support such a program. In other words, nothing less than a program truly, not merely verbally, radical in scope would be adequate to meet the present crisis; and nothing less than a politically constituted majority, outnumbering the conservative forces, would be adequate to carry it through.

Now, it so happens that there is one social force which, by virtue both of its size and its very nature, is essential to the creation of such a majority—and so in relation to which the success or failure of the black struggle must finally turn. And that is the American trade-union movement.

Addressing the AFL-CIO Convention in 1961, Martin Luther King observed: "Negroes are almost entirely a working people. There are pitifully few Negro millionaires and few Negro employers. Our needs are identical with labor's needs—decent wages, fair working conditions, livable housing, old-age security, health and welfare measures, conditions in which families can grow, have education for their children and respect in the community."

Despite the widely held belief that the blacks and the unions have not the same, but rather irreconcilable, interests—and despite the fact that certain identifiable unions do practice discrimination—King's words remain valid today. Blacks are
Bayard Rustin
THE BLACKS AND THE UNIONS
mostly a working people, they continue to need what labor needs, and they must fight side by side with unions to achieve these things.

Of all the misconceptions about the labor movement that have been so lovingly dwelt on in the liberal press, perhaps none is put forth more often and is farther from the truth than that the unions are of and for white people. For one thing, there are, according to labor historian Thomas R. Brooks, between 2,500,000 and 2,750,000 black trade unionists in America. If his figures are correct, and other estimates seem to bear them out, the percentage of blacks in the unions is a good deal higher than the percentage of blacks in the total population—15 per cent as compared with 11 per cent, to be precise. And since the vast majority of black trade unionists members of integrated unions, one can conclude that the labor movement is the most integrated major institution in American society, certainly more integrated than the corporations, the churches, or the universities.

Moreover, blacks are joining unions in increasing numbers. According to a 1968 report by Business Week, one out of every three new union members is black. The sector of the economy which is currently being most rapidly unionized is that of the service industries, and most particularly among government employees, such as hospital workers, sanitation workers, farm workers, and paraprofessionals in educational and social-welfare institutions. This category of worker is, of course, both largely nonwhite and shamefully underpaid.

Like other workers, blacks have gained from the achievements of their unions in the way of higher wages, improved working conditions, and better fringe benefits. To be sure, in some unions whites still possess a disproportionate number of the higher-paying jobs and there is not yet adequate black representation at the staff level and in policymaking positions. But the question of what continues to account for the perpetuation of such inequities cannot properly be answered by the fashionable and easy reference to racial discrimination in the unions. Statistical surveys have shown that the participation of blacks in the work force is no higher in nonunionized occupations than in unionized ones. Indeed, as Derek C. Bok and John T. Dunlop have pointed out in their remarkably informed and comprehensive study, Labor and the American Community, even in the automotive and aerospace industries, where the unions have been known for dedication to racial justice, the percentage of blacks, particularly in the skilled jobs, is not appreciably higher than in other industries.

There have, therefore, to be far more fundamental social and economic reasons for present inequalities in employment. Primary among these reasons are certain underlying changes within the entire society which are being reflected in the evolving character and composition of the work force itself. The upsurge of union organization of minority-group workers in the fields of education, sanitation, and health care, for instance, is the result of the rapid expansion of the service sector of the economy.

Another crucial factor here is government economic policy. The tremendous growth in the economy from 1960 to 1968 increased nonwhite employment by 19 per cent, 4 per cent higher than the increase for whites, and during the same period the unemployment rate for nonwhite adult men dropped from 9.6 to 3.9 per cent. A large number of these new black workers entered unions for the simple reason that they had jobs. And now many of them are out of jobs, not because of union discrimination, but because the Nixon Administration's economic policies have so far caused a sharp increase in unemployment.

All of which is not to exonerate the entire labor movement of any possible charge of wrongdoing. It is rather to put the problem of economic inequality into some useful perspective. The inequalities which persist within the unions must of course be corrected. They are in fact being corrected through the work of the labor movement itself—the role of the Civil Rights Department of the AFL-CIO is particularly noteworthy here—the civil-rights activities of the federal government, and the efforts of black trade unionists who are taking over leadership positions in their locals and are playing more of a role in determining union policy. The union drive against discrimination was exemplified by the fight made by the AFL-CIO to have a Fair Employment Practices section written into the 1964 Civil Rights Act. Both President Kennedy and Robert Kennedy were opposed to including an FEPC section because they thought it would kill the bill, but George Meany pressed for it. He did so for a simple reason. The AFL-CIO is a federation of affiliates which retain a relatively high degree of autonomy. The parent body can urge compliance with its policies, but the decision to act is left up to the affiliates. Meany felt that the only way the AFL-CIO could deal effectively with unions practicing discrimination would be to demand compliance with the law of the land. He testified before the House Judiciary Committee that the labor movement was calling "for legislation for the correction of shortcomings in its own ranks." And the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act greatly speeded the process of this correction.

Most labor leaders, I believe, are opposed to discrimination against the blacks on moral grounds. But they also have highly practical grounds for their position. They understand that discrimination hurts the entire labor movement as much as it hurts blacks. They know from long experience as unionists that anything which divides the workers makes it more difficult for them to struggle together for the achievement of common goals. Racial antagonisms have undermined solidarity during strikes and have been exploited by management as a means of weakening unions. The following passage from the classic study, The Black Worker,
Bayard Rustin
THE BLACKS AND THE UNIONS

written in 1931 by Sterling D. Spero and Abram L. Harris, may not be typical of every company's approach to its work force, yet it describes a practice commonly in use till this very day:

The Negro is now recognized as a permanent factor in industry and large employers use him as one of the racial and national elements which help to break homogeneity of their labor force. This, incidentally, fits into the program of big concerns for maintaining what they call "a cosmopolitan force," which frees the employer from dependence upon any one group for his labor supply and also sheaths unity of purpose and labor organization.

People no longer lend much credence to the idea that management continues to think and operate in such convoluted terms. But it does, and so does labor. Indeed, such terms as "labor solidarity" or "labor disunity" are standard tools of the trade in labor-management relations. A further error is to imagine that unions might from such reasoning increase unity within their ranks by excluding blacks. On the contrary, given the character of the American working class, the only possibility for genuine labor solidarity is for the blacks to be fully integrated into every level of the trade-union movement. If they are not, then they will continue to exist outside the unions as a constant source of cheap labor exploitable by management to depress wages or to break strikes.

Another notion which has passed into vogue among some blacks as well as some whites is that the whole problem of integration can be finessed by organizing the workers into dual unions. This is not a new idea; nor is it its feasibility any greater today than was evidenced by a record of impossibility in the past. For were there to be racially separate unions, it would naturally follow that the interests of blacks would be diametrically opposed to those of whites, with whom they would be in competition. And once again, no matter how innocently or unintentionally, the blacks would remain in the role of being a reserve army that could be called into action whenever companies felt the white workers needed a good kick in the pants.

Of course, the blacks would also be victims in this situation since they would be at the beck and call of management only if they were chronically unemployed. Thus, exploitation is as much the effect of poverty as its cause. It is only the poor, those who are needy and weak, who can be manipulated at the whim of the wealthy. This introduces another notion concerning the welfare of black and white workers about which there has grown up a misplaced skepticism—namely, the function of the supply of labor. Put very simply, it is in the interests of employers for the supply of labor to be greater than the demand for it. This situation obtains when there is high unemployment or what is often called a "loose" labor market. Under these conditions, the bargaining position of the unions is weakened since labor, which is after all the product unions are selling, is not in high demand, and also because there are a lot of unemployed workers whom the companies can turn to if the unions should in any way prove recalcitrant. Generally speaking, an excess of supply over demand for labor exerts a downward pressure on wages, and, vice versa, there is an upward pressure on wages when the demand for labor outpaces the supply. In addition, this dynamic of supply and demand affects the level of racial antagonism within the work force. If supply exceeds demand, i.e., if there is a high level of unemployment, there will be tremendous competition for jobs. If supply exceeds demand, i.e., if there is a high level of unemployment, there will be tremendous competition for jobs between white and black workers, and racial tensions will increase. Under conditions of relative full employment, there will be little job competition and greater racial harmony. As George Lichtheim recently pointed out: "If economic conflict as a source of political antagonism is ruled out... the residual cultural tensions... need not and doubtless will not fall to zero; but they can be held down to a tolerable level."

These ideas shape the conceptual universe as well as the behavior of many of the principal actors in our country's economic conflicts. The fact that they tend to be ignored in so much current discussion of blacks and unions is as much a testimony to the naivete of liberal journalists as it is to the public-relations skills of corporations. A good example of what I mean is the press treatment accorded the terrible racial conflict in the building trades and the Administration's policies in this area.

Racial discrimination exists in the building trades. It is unjustifiable by any moral standard, and as to the objective of rooting it out there can be no disagreement among people of good will. How truly to achieve this objective is another matter. An important distinction here is often overlooked. One cannot set varying moral standards in judging the performance of institutions; the same standard must be applied equally to all—to the unions, the corporations, the churches, etc. But beyond the realm of moral judgment is the crucial question of social utility. Blacks could attack Jim Crow in the South without regard to the welfare of the lunch counters, the hotels, or whatever, because they had little or no stake in them. This is not the case with the trade-union movement, a social force in which blacks do have a stake. If blacks attack the unions in such a way as to damage them irreparably, they will ultimately harm themselves. As it happens, certain presently self-styled friends of the Negro are in fact not at all averse to such a possible development.

Writing in the New York Times, Tom Wicker reflected the views of many liberals when he described the Nixon Administration's strong and forthright position on the building trades issue as "remarkable." Wicker's analysis, however, never advances beyond this point. He never asks why the Nixon Administration—particularly Attorney General Mitchell, and most particularly given other Admin-

istration policies—would suddenly take such an interest in the welfare of blacks. The question is neither gratuitous nor idle. Why, in fact, would a President who has developed a "Southern strategy," who has cut back on school-integration efforts, tried to undermine the black franchise by watering down the 1965 Voting Rights Act, nominated to the Supreme Court men like Haynsworth and Carswell, cut back on funds for vital social programs, and proposed a noxious crime bill for Washington, D.C.—which is nothing less than a blatant appeal to white fear—why indeed would such a President take up the cause of integration in the building trades?

To begin with, Mr. Nixon's Philadelphia Plan—which requires contractors to make a commitment to hire a certain quota of black workers on a job where over $500,000 of federal funds are involved—actually does nothing for integration. In order to meet this commitment, a contractor could shift the required number of black workers in an area onto a particular job, a procedure known in the trade as checker-boarding. He would thus satisfy federal requirements for that job, but no new jobs would be created for blacks and no Negroes would be brought into the building trades. In fact, the contractor can even achieve compliance simply by making an effort of good faith, such as contacting certain people in the area who are concerned about black participation in the building trades. If those people do not produce any workers, the contractor has done his job and can get the federal money. The Philadelphia Plan makes no provision for training, nor does it provide a means for blacks to attain the security of journeyman status within the unions. It is geared only to temporary jobs, and even in this area it is deficient. It is designed primarily to embarrass the unions and to organize public pressure against them.

In simple truth, the plan is part and parcel of a general Republican attack on labor. The same Administration which designed it (as well as the Southern strategy), has also sent to Congress a measure that would increase federal control over internal union political affairs. Republican Senators and Representatives have introduced dozens of antilabor bills: one of which, for example, would create a right-to-work law for federal employees; another would restrict labor's involvement in political activities. Moreover, the Administration has turned the heat on labor at the same time that it has cooled pressure against discrimination by the corporations.

The advantages to the Republicans from this kind of strategy should be obvious. Nixon supports his friends among the corporate elite and hurts his enemies in the unions. He also gains a convenient cover for his anti-Negro policies in the South, and above all, he weakens his political opposition by aggravating the differences between its two strongest and most progressive forces—the labor movement and the civil-rights movement.

The Philadelphia Plan and related actions are also part of the Administration’s attempt to pin onto labor the blame for inflation in construction costs. The Wall Street Journal has suggested that contractors welcome the thrust for integration in the building trades since this "might slow inflation in construction by increasing the supply of workers." There is reason to believe that Mr. Nixon thinks in these same terms. It will be remembered that on almost the very day he proposed the Philadelphia Plan, he also ordered a 75 per cent reduction in federal construction—thereby reducing the number of jobs available in the industry and producing the twofold effect of exerting a deflationary pressure on wages and increasing competition among workers over scarce jobs. When Nixon finally freed some of the construction funds some months later (a move no doubt designed to improve the economic picture for the 1970 elections), he warned that "a shortage of skilled labor runs up the cost of that labor." He said he would issue directives to the Secretaries of Defense; Labor; and Health, Education, and Welfare to train veterans and others toward the goal of "enlarging the pool of skilled manpower."

It should be pointed out in passing that the President’s approach to the problem of inflation in construction costs cannot succeed since he has made the typical businessman’s error of identifying wages as the major inflationary factor. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, on-site labor costs as a percentage of total construction costs decreased between 1949 and 1969 from 33 per cent to 18 per cent. During the same period, the combined cost of land and financing rose from 16 per cent to 31 per cent of the total cost. Thus land and financing, not labor, have been the major causes of inflation in construction. Nevertheless, the President continues his crusade against "wage inflation."

The concern with increasing the supply while reducing the cost of labor is what motivated the Nixon Administration’s most recent act in the construction field—the suspension of the 1931 Davis-Bacon Act. Here the "deflationary" intention is more evident than in the case of the Philadelphia Plan, but the similarity between the two moves is striking, particularly with regard to the anti-union role envisioned for the unorganized Negro worker.

The Davis-Bacon Act requires contractors on federal or federally assisted projects to pay all workers, union or nonunion, the prevailing union wage rates. The suspension of the Act will not directly affect the wages of unionized workers who are protected by their contract. It will, however, enable contractors to cut the wages of nonunion workers, and this, in turn, should encourage the employment of these workers instead of the higher paid unionists. Thus, there will be fewer jobs for organized workers (there is already an 11 per cent unemployment rate in the construction industry), and the bargaining power of the unions will be weakened. Since many of the unorganized workers are nonwhite, it might be argued that this is a boon to their fortunes since they will be more likely to find work. Aside from the fact that they will be working for lower wages, the question is again
Bayard Rustin
THE BLACKS
AND
THE UNIONS

raised whether it is in the interests of blacks to let themselves be used by employers to hurt unions. I do not think that it is. Their interests lie in becoming part of the trade-union movement. Ironically, the current attack on labor may speed the process of their entrance into the labor movement, for in situations where union standards have been threatened by open shops, unions have been spurred on to fully organize their industry.

It should be emphasized that this would only encourage changes that have already been taking place for a number of years as a result of pressure from civil-rights groups and union leaders.

Seventy-nine Outreach programs now operate in as many cities and have placed over 8,000 minority-group youngsters in building-trades apprenticeship training programs. Sixty per cent have been placed in the highest paying trades—the plumbers, electricians, sheet-metal workers, carpenters, pipe fitters, and iron workers. This is far from sufficient, of course, but within the past two years these programs have expanded by over 400 per cent, and they are continuing to grow. The role of civil-rights activists should be to continue to see that they grow.

THE BLACKS HAVE A CHOICE. They can fight to strengthen the trade-union movement by wiping out the vestiges of segregation that remain in it, or they can, knowingly or unknowingly, offer themselves as pawns in the conservatives’ games of bust-the-unions.

The choice must be made on the basis of a critical assessment of the current economic plight of blacks. More than any single factor, the Nixon Administration’s policies of high interest rates, “fiscal responsibility,” and economic slowdown are undermining the gains which blacks made during the past decade. Dr. Charles C. Killingsworth, a leading manpower economist, predicted some months ago that within a year the unemployment rate is likely to go up to 8 per cent. We could expect the rate for blacks to be twice as high. Nixon’s managed recession may calm the fears of businessmen, but it will do so at terrible cost to blacks and to all other working people. There are, no doubt, many well-meaning people who are concerned about the plight of unemployed workers under Nixon, but it is only the labor movement that is fighting every day for policies that will get these workers back on the job.

Thus, it is clear why unions are important to black workers. What may perhaps seem less obvious and must also be sharply emphasized is that the legislative program of the trade-union movement can go a long way toward satisfying the economic needs of the larger black community. The racial crisis, as we have seen, is not an isolated problem that lends itself to redress by a protesting minority. Being rooted in the very social and economic structure of the society, it can be solved only by a comprehensive program that gets to the heart of why we can’t build adequate housing for everybody, why we must always have a “tolerable” level of unemployment, or why we lack enough funds for education. In this sense the racial crisis challenges the entire society’s capacity to redirect its resources on the basis of human need rather than profit. Blacks can pose this challenge, but only the federal government has the power and the money to meet it. And it is here that the trade-union movement can play such an important role.

The problems of the most aggrieved sector of the black ghetto cannot and will never be solved without full employment, and full employment, with the government as employer of last resort, is the keystone of labor’s program. One searches in vain among the many so-called friends of the black struggle for a seconding voice to this simple yet far-reaching proposition. Some call it inflationary, while to others, who are caught up in the excitement of the black cultural revolution, it is pedestrian and irrelevant. But in terms of the economic condition of the black community, nothing more radical has yet been proposed. There is simply no other way for the black proletariat to become a proletariat. And full employment is only one part of labor’s program. The movement’s proposals in the areas of health, housing, education, and environment would, if enacted, achieve nothing less than the transformation of the quality of our urban life. How ironic that in this period when the trade-union movement is thought to be conservative, its social and economic policies are far and away more progressive than those of any other major American institution. Nor—again in contrast to most of the other groups officially concerned with these things—is labor’s program merely in the nature of a grand proposal; there is also an actual record of performance, particularly in the area of civil rights. Clarence Mitchell, the director of the Washington Bureau of the NAACP and legislative chairman of the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights, a man more deeply involved in Congressional civil-rights battles than any other black in America, has said, “None of the legislative fights we have made in the field of civil rights could have been won without the trade-union movement. We couldn’t have beaten Haynsworth without labor, and the struggle against Carswell would not have been a contest.”

Labor’s interest in progressive social legislation naturally leads it into the political arena. The Committee on Political Education of the AFL-CIO, the Political Action Committee of the UAW, and the political arm of the Teamsters were active in every state in the last election registering and educating voters and getting out the vote. This year trade unionists were more politically active than they have ever been during an off-year election. The reason for this is clear. With so many liberal Senators up for reelection, and with political alignments in great flux, 1970 presented itself as a year that would initiate a new period in American politics—a period which would see the regrouping of liberal forces or the consolidation of a conservative majority.

One of the important factors determining the kind of political alignments that will emerge from
this period of instability will be the relationship between the trade-union movement and the liberal community, and today this relationship is severely strained. Differences over the war in Vietnam are frequently cited as a major cause of this division, but there has been a great deal of misunderstanding on this issue. The house of labor itself is divided over the war, and even those labor leaders who support it have enthusiastically backed dove Congressional candidates who have liberal domestic records, among them such firm opponents of the war as Mike Mansfield, Edward Kennedy, Vance Hartke, Philip Hart, Howard Metzenbaum, and Edmund Muskie.

A better understanding of the trade-union movement by liberals may be developing, but for the present the antagonistic attitudes that exist cast an ideological pall over the chances for uniting the democratic Left coalition. It must be said that the vehement contempt with which the liberals have come to attack the unions bespeaks something more than a mere political critique of "conservatism." When A. H. Raskin writes that "the typical worker—from construction craftsman to shoe clerk—has become probably the most reactionary political force in the country"; or when Anthony Lewis lumps under the same category the rich oilemen and "the members of powerful, monopolistic labor unions"; or when Murray Kempton writes that "the AFL-CIO has lived happily in a society which, more lavishly than any in history, has managed the care and feeding of incompetent white people," and adds, "Who better represents that ideal than George Wallace"; or when many other liberals casually toss around the phrase "labor-fascists," one cannot but inevitably conclude that one is in the presence not of political opposition but of a certain class hatred. This hatred is not necessarily one based on conflicting class interests—though they may play a role here—but rather a hatred of the elite for the "mass." And this hatred is multiplied a thousandfold by the fact that we live in a democratic society in which the coarse multitude can outvote the elite and make decisions which may be contrary to the wishes and values, perhaps even the interests and the prejudices, of those who are better off.

It is difficult not to conclude that many liberals and radicals use subjective, rather than objective, criteria in judging the character of a social force. A progressive force, in their view, is one that is alienated from the dominant values of the culture, not one which contributes to greater social equality and distributive justice. Thus today the trade-union movement has been relegated to reactionary status, even though it is actually more progressive than at any time in its history—if by progressive we mean a commitment to broad, long-term social reform in addition to the immediate objectives of improving wages and working conditions. At the same time, the most impoverished social group, that substratum which Herbert Marcuse longingly calls "the outcasts and the outsiders," has been made the new vanguard of social progress. And it is here that liberals and New Leftists come together in their proposal for a new coalition "of the rich, educated, and dedicated with the poor," as Eric F. Goldman has admiringly described it, or in Walter Laqueur's more caustic phraseology, "between the Lumpenproletariat and the Lumpenintelligentsia."

"Today the trade-union movement has been relegated to reactionary status, even though it is actually more progressive than at any time in its history..."

This political approach, known among liberals as New Politics and among radicals as New Leftism, denotes a certain convergence of the Left and the Right, if not in philosophy and intent, then at least in practical effect. I am not referring simply to the elitism which the intellectual Left shares with the economic Right, but also to their symbolic political relationship. Many of the sophisticated right-wing attacks on labor are frequently couched in left-wing rhetoric. Conservative claims that unions are anti-black, are responsible for inflation, and constitute minorities which threaten and intimidate the majority reverberate in the liberal community and are shaping public opinion to accept a crackdown on the trade-union movement.

While many adherents of the New Politics are outraged by Nixon's Southern strategy, their own strategy is simply the reverse of his. The potential for a Republican majority depends upon Nixon's success in attracting into the conservative fold lower-middle-class whites, the same group that the New Politics has written off. The question is not whether this group is conservative or liberal, for it is both, and how it acts will depend upon the way the issues are defined. If they are defined as race and dissent, then Nixon will win. But if, on the other hand, they are defined so as to appeal to the progressive economic interests of the lower middle class, then it becomes possible to build an alliance on the basis of common interest between this group and the black community. The importance of the trade-union movement is that it embodies this common interest. This was proved most clearly in 1968 when labor mounted a massive educational campaign which reduced the Wallace supporters among its membership to a tiny minority. And the trade-union movement remains today the greatest obstacle to the success of Nixon's strategy.

The prominent racial and ethnic loyalties that divide American society have, together with our democratic creed, obscured a fundamental reality—that we are a class society and, though we do not often talk about such things, that we are engaged in a class struggle. This reality may not provide some people with their wished-for quotient of drama, though I would think that the CIO strike or the UAW strike against GM are sufficiently dramatic, and it may now have become an institutionalized struggle between the trade-union movement and the owners and managers of corporate wealth. Yet it is a struggle nonetheless, and its outcome will determine whether we will have a greater or lesser degree of economic and social equality in this country. As long as blacks are poor, our own struggle will be part of this broader class reality. To the degree that it is not, black liberation will remain a dream in the souls of an oppressed people.