

REVIEWS

Fragile Alliances

Labor and Politics in Evansville, Indiana, 1919-1955

By Samuel W. White

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Historians exploring organized labor's decline during recent decades have increasingly turned their attention to politics. Few, however, have observed the axiom that "all politics is local"; most have focused more on national politics and organizations. Samuel W. White's *Fragile Alliances* reflects the growing interest in labor and politics at a local level. White explores the "fragile alliances" Evansville unions made with politicians in the years between the end of World War I and the 1955 merger of the AFL and CIO, as well as the equally fragile alliances that lay at the heart of both organized labor and the Democratic Party. He provides useful insights into the successes and failures unions experienced in their engagement with electoral politics, and important suggestions about the reasons that labor failed, even at the height of its strength, to fundamentally reshape the nation's politics.

The bulk of *Fragile Alliances* is devoted to a chronological survey of labor's engagement with local politics. While the full details are too complex to summarize here, the general course of labor's political fortunes is fairly straightforward—and frequently at odds with the trajectory plotted by those studying labor politics at the national level.

Labor entered the postwar period strong and politically engaged. After the war, changing public opinion, the disastrous 1919 coal strike, political mistakes, Americanism's appeal to many working people (in such guises as forced Americanization, the American Plan, and the Ku Klux Klan), and the lure of consumerism combined to bring dramatic changes. By the end of the 1920s, labor was politically weak and divided.

The 1930s saw an upsurge in organizing and the return of labor

issues to politics. But Evansville's story bears limited resemblance to the bright tales of victory that so often appear in the histories of this period. While local unions enjoyed substantial organizing success, they might have achieved much more but for a combination of determined employer resistance and bitter infighting between the AFL and CIO. Labor factionalism, combined with political fracture lines dividing the groups that elsewhere solidly supported the New Deal, prevented the Democratic Party from building a strong, durable coalition. Even at the height of the New Deal, the local party was a fragile alliance, as was organized labor.

This state of affairs continued during and after World War II. Jurisdictional battles pitted unions against one another, as did the issue of communism. Employer resistance continued unabated. And the Democratic Party experienced significant defections, including the shift of many workers to the Republican Party. By 1955, local unions had wasted any opportunities presented by the postwar period with years of squabbling, purges of many dedicated union activists, the destruction of an effective and influential left-led United Electrical Workers local, and sporadic raiding of one another's membership. White argues convincingly that labor's political "space" was substantially narrower than it had been in 1919. The divisive effects of Americanism, anticommunism, race, consumerism, and employer opposition, combined

with the fragility of the labor-Democratic coalition, had eliminated alternative labor visions from local politics.

Fragile Alliances has much to recommend it. While the attention to detailed election results at times seems excessive, it yields a rare, close-up look at working class voting patterns. White's discussions of AFL unions in the 1930s and the Klan's appeal to workers focus attention on questions too frequently ignored. Welcome, too, is the attention to employers, whose unusually successful opposition to the New Deal labor regime had a major effect on the city's unions.

Most significantly, White's history of labor and politics in Evansville reminds us that the generalizations historians make about this topic simply may not have held true in many places. If all politics is indeed local, we need to understand much more about how workers and unions engaged in politics at this level if we are to adequately explain labor's bleak political fortunes.

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