

JAMELLE BOUIE

Southern Republican Governors Are Suddenly Afraid

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Last year the United Auto Workers announced an ambitious plan to organize workers and unionize foreign-owned auto plants in the South.

“One of our biggest goals coming out of this historic contract victory is to organize like we’ve never organized before,” Shawn Fain, the president of the U.A.W., said after winning significant wage and benefit gains in negotiations with Ford, General Motors and Stellantis (formerly Chrysler). “When we return to the bargaining table in 2028, it won’t just be with the Big Three. It will be the Big Five or Six.”

Fain, believe it or not, may have understated the union’s ambitions.

The U.A.W. is targeting 13 automakers — including Toyota, Hyundai, Honda, Nissan, Volvo and Tesla — employing around 150,000 workers in 36 nonunion plants across the South. It faced the first major test of its strategy on Wednesday, when 4,300 workers at a Volkswagen factory in Chattanooga, Tenn., began voting on whether to unionize. The vote ends on Friday. If it’s successful, it will be a breakthrough for a labor movement that has struggled to build a footing in the South.

The mere potential for union success was so threatening that the day before the vote began, several of the Southern Republican governors announced their opposition to the U.A.W. campaign. “We the governors of Alabama, Georgia, Mississippi, South Carolina,

Tennessee and Texas are highly concerned about the unionization campaign driven by misinformation and scare tactics that the U.A.W. has brought into our states,” their joint statement reads. “As governors, we have a responsibility to our constituents to speak up when we see special interests looking to come into our state and threaten our jobs and the values we live by.”

It is no shock to see conservative Republicans opposing organized labor. But it is difficult to observe this particular struggle, taking place as it is in the South, without being reminded of the region’s entrenched hostility to unions — or any other institution or effort that might weaken the political and economic dominance of capital over the whole of Southern society.

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The history of Southern political economy is to a great extent a history of the unbreakable addiction of Southern political and economic elites to no-wage and low-wage labor. Before the Civil War, of course, this meant slavery. And where the peculiar institution was most lucrative, an ideology grew from the soil of the cotton and rice fields and sugar plantations, one that elevated human bondage as the only solid foundation of a stable society.

“In all social systems there must be a class to do the menial duties, to perform the drudgery of life,” Senator James Henry Hammond of South Carolina declared in an 1858 speech. “It constitutes the very mudsill of society and of political government, and you might as well attempt to build a house in the air, as to build either the one or the other, except on this mudsill.”

A decade later and the slave system was dead, crushed underfoot by the armies of emancipation. The landowning Southern elites had lost their greatest asset — a seemingly inexhaustible supply of free labor. They would never regain it, but they would fight as hard as they could to approximate it.

The next 30 years of Southern political life would be a roiling battle to stymie Black political and economic power, part of a larger struggle to control Southern labor, Black and white alike. By the turn of the 20th century, Southern elites had silenced the Populist movement and the agrarian rebellion of the 1890s — which brought poor Southerners of both races together in a fledgling and fragile political alliance — with Jim Crow segregation and disenfranchisement.

As the sociologist Jack M. Bloom puts it in “Class, Race and the Civil Rights Movement”:

The apparent defeat of Populism and the subsequent disenfranchisement of blacks brought about a severe setback for these whites, as well. Many of them lost the right to vote. They were subject to the harsh terms of their employers, and they remained without labor unions to counter the power the wealthy retained. When they did try to form unions, they found the region’s tradition of violence turned against them.

White supremacy had triumphed, but not all whites would be supreme.

Jim Crow did not eradicate Black political action or erase class conflict among white people. Nonetheless, it established a hierarchical order of social and economic dominance by the owners of land and capital. It also produced a world of poverty and disinvestment, of Robert Penn Warren’s torn-down mills and grass-covered tracks and “whitewashed shacks, all just alike, set in a row by the cotton fields.”

It was in defense of this world that Southern political and economic elites bitterly resisted organized labor as it grew by leaps and bounds in the 1930s, backed by Franklin Roosevelt, Robert Wagner and the National Labor Relations Act. It was in defense of this world that those same elites fought, successfully, to derail the Congress of Industrial Organizations’ postwar effort to organize the South, Operation Dixie.

It was in defense of this world, as the historian Katherine Rye Jewell points out in “Dollars for Dixie: Business and the Transformation of Conservatism in the Twentieth Century,” that Southern elites fashioned cultural traditionalism, anti-New Dealism and free market ideology into a new mantra of “free enterprise.” It was meant to stand athwart a supposed movement “away from individual responsibility, states’ rights and local and community self-government,” in the words of the Southern States Industrial Council, a business group organized in opposition to Roosevelt’s vision for the country.

Organized labor was and remains a threat to the political and economic elites of a region whose foremost commitment is to the maintenance of an employer-dominated economy of low-wage labor and its attendant social order. Whereas an earlier generation complained of C.I.O. “communism,” this one warns of U.A.W. socialism. “They proudly call themselves democratic socialists,” the statement issued on Tuesday by the Republican governors says.

You may have heard the phrase “New South.” It first took hold in the last decades of the 19th century, a slogan meant to distinguish the forward-looking merchants and industrialists of the post-Reconstruction years from those whose gaze was fixed hopelessly back toward a bygone age. “It vaguely set apart those whose faith lay in the future from those whose heart was with the past,” the historian C. Vann Woodward observed.

The term made a bit of a comeback in the mid-20th century to describe the modernization of the South in the years and decades after World War II. This New South was, as a result of the victories of the civil rights movement, a more moderate South of integration and economic growth.

Neither the vote in Chattanooga nor the coming vote of auto workers at the Mercedes-Benz factory near Tuscaloosa, Ala., will be dispositive for the ultimate success of the U.A.W. campaign in the South. Win or lose, this will be a long march for organized labor.

But like a gardener taking stock of her plot for the season ahead, we will have to be patient. Victory might bring the chance to refresh the soil in preparation for a new kind of New South.

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