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Divide and Conquer: What a KKK Billboard and Operation Dixie Reveal About Opposition to Unionization in the Postwar South

In 1946, a KKK billboard which said, “CIO IS COMMUNISTIC COMMUNISM WILL NOT BE TOLERATED KU KLUX KLAN RIDES AGAIN!”¹ was seen across the American South. The billboard was a reaction to Operation Dixie, the attempt by the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) to unionize the Southern United States, a region with scant industry, after World War II. In a country where unionization was legal for a decade, it seemed like the ideal time for unions to make deep inroads into the South. If successful in this region, it could lead to a permanent shift in Southern labor dynamics, race relations, and economic conditions. However, a decade later, the campaign ended in failure. The CIO failed to make a significant mark, something still reflected to this day with the South’s below average and faster declining unionization rates in relation to the rest of the country. A key factor in its demise was race. The Southern economy depended on exploiting labor by splitting workers along racial lines. It was a system started during colonial times with plantation agriculture and became embedded throughout Southern culture and law. This racial hierarchy weakened collective bargaining by preventing solidarity between Black and white workers. The KKK billboard reflects this reality, revealing embedded white supremacy was a central reason unionization failed as it threatened the existing racial caste system by uniting black and white workers to fight for better livelihoods.

¹ Southern Labor Archives. *KKK Answer to the CIO’s “Operation Dixie.”*

Before going into about Operation Dixie, it is important to go over the history of Southern labor practices. The Southern economy was first dominated by the use of slavery in plantation agriculture. From the start of British settlements in Virginia and South Carolina, slavery offered cheap, unpaid labor with cash crops like tobacco, indigo, and eventually cotton, creating a plantation elite who benefitted off the backs of black slaves. This planter elite used their economic dominance to control politics in order to maintain the status quo. This practice of plantation agriculture continued until the end of the Civil War, when slavery was abolished under the 13th Amendment. Reconstruction offered promise to ex-slaves to build their own lives and have a voice in society by winning major rights. “Freedman schools,” public education, rising wages in response to labor shortages, emancipated slaves in public office, and “welfare” policies that boosted the independence of African-Americans all promised to remake the South in the image of the reviled North.”² These new opportunities had the chance to change Southern society, if it was allowed more time to succeed. This new system threatened the planter elites’ power, however, and they had to crush it.

After Reconstruction, the planter elite came back to power, starting the new system of sharecropping and Jim Crow segregation laws to subjugate black people in order to cheaply regain their wealth. It was during this time, however, the first signs of industrialization emerged in the South with the rise of the textile industry. A new class of entrepreneurs and industrialists who developed these industries also relied on the Jim Crow system to do business cheaply. “Employers used every opportunity to hold down white wages and hobble unionization. This strategy exerted enormous pressure on the living standards of poor whites.”³ The exploitation of labor and race-baiting tactics were merely sustained and not changed by the rise of industry as

² Evans, Ivan. *Cultures of Violence: Lynching and Racial Killing in South Africa and the American South*. Manchester University Press, 2009. *JSTOR*, 59.

³ Evans, 74

industrialists wanted to have cheap labor and prevent white and black workers from uniting to demand better wages. While there were attempts to form unions in the South, they were far less successful compared to the rest of the country due to deep seated prejudice, only perpetuated by the leaders of these new enterprises. However, the Great Depression and World War II offered new opportunities as industry expanded and progressive politics spread nationally. It was during this time the National Labor Relations Act of 1935, which legalized union formation and strikes, was codified. Union membership exploded across the country as it became legal. World War II saw the country get out of the Depression, with war production at an all time high. Industry grew substantially in the South, developing the Southern economy and putting it in the direction of an industrial economy rather than agricultural. This gave unions the perfect opportunity to increase their power.

After World War II, a series of strikes and a concerted campaign by big business caused the public to turn against unions. “Yet, as denounced by business spokesmen—and, ominously, by some in the Truman administration—labor’s actions were viewed by the society as a whole as being impetuous, greedy, or, more simply, radical.”⁴ This new reality forced organized labor to expand its base of support in order to sustain itself from this concerted attack. Businesses were moving factories and jobs away from the unionized North towards the nonunionized South. Labor realized it needed to unionize the South in order to “neutralize” the threat it posed to Northern factories and its ability to sustain the movement. The Congress of Industrial Organizations accepted this need, and began to organize an operation to unionize the South. What came was Operation Dixie.

⁴ GRIFFITH, BARBARA S. *The Crisis of American Labor: Operation Dixie and the Defeat of the CIO*. Temple University Press, 1988. *JSTOR*, 15.

Operation Dixie officially lasted for seven years, from 1946 to 1953 and ended in defeat. While economic resistance and political opposition posed significant challenges, these obstacles do not fully explain the campaign's demise. Rather, it was the more persistent barrier of Southern society itself. Longstanding social divisions of racism and white supremacy shaped how workers understood their interests and how governments and groups such as the KKK responded to unionization. To fully understand why Operation Dixie failed, it is necessary to examine this reality and how it undermined efforts to build a unified labor movement.

When Operation Dixie was announced by the CIO in 1946, it came with great fanfare with the realization that it could dismantle Jim Crow and move the South beyond it. The CIO and the press realized its potential for doing so. In an article published by *The Pittsburgh Courier* in April 1946 about the operation, they wrote, "What the Southern oligarchy has long feared is about to come to pass—the CIO organizational drive into the Sold South. ... One of the by-products or side objectives of the coming campaign will be the elimination of the vicious poll tax and other forms of discrimination by which the South has been maintained as open shop territory and the poorhouse of the Nation. ... Organization of the South's workers on a large scale will do much to lift the standard of living, ...".⁵ This operation, as said by newspapers and acknowledged by the CIO, would do much to change the South. African Americans especially felt hopeful of the chance to unionize and win better opportunities. It was a chance to build a new future and potentially overthrow the system of segregation that kept them impoverished for generations. World War II allowed black Americans to get jobs in factories, offering a potential ticket out of poverty. "The tense wartime and postwar race relations that gripped the South had given organized labor opportunities to demonstrate its commitment to defending black civil rights and helping blacks develop economically. By the end of World War II, 1.25 million blacks

⁵ "Operation Dixie." *The Pittsburgh Courier*, 20 Apr. 1946.

had industrial jobs, an increase of 150 percent over 1940.”⁶ This newfound economic potential extended further into winning civil and voting rights for blacks. “Leading black ministers cooperated with CIO and some AFL representatives to register more than twenty-three thousand black voters in Alabama and more than thirty-five thousand in Florida.”⁷ This unionization drive not only had the potential to win economic gains. Through collaboration with leading Southern black community leaders, it had the potential to create a new chapter in race relations and civil rights, one where black citizens have more economic and political power as equals. However, this enthusiasm was short-lived, as state governments and private organizations also realized Operation Dixie’s potential to revolutionize race relations. The pushback began shortly after.

As early as the end of 1946, there was alarm within the CIO about the growing failures of unionization, a reflection of centuries of racial division and an organized campaign from private racist groups such as the KKK. In November of that year, an article from *The Wall Street Journal* wrote, “The National Labor Relations Board has some statistics which indicate the trouble the CIO is having down South. During August and September, 494 N.L.R.B elections were held in the southern campaign area to determine who should represent groups of workers for collective bargaining. In these 494 elections, the CIO won 115.”⁸ The failure to win the majority of elections indicates the start of an organized campaign to stop unionization, one that was predicated on the notion of race. The CIO was open about their opposition to Jim Crow and white supremacy, generating opposition from the KKK. This opposition can be seen through the billboard that was put up by the Klan as shown in the introduction. The KKK billboard said the

⁶ FONES-WOLF, ELIZABETH, and KEN FONES-WOLF. *Struggle for the Soul of the Postwar South: White Evangelical Protestants and Operation Dixie*. University of Illinois Press, 2015. *JSTOR*, 181.

⁷ Fones-Wolf and Fones-Wolf, 182.

⁸ Haller, Ellis. “CIO in the South: ‘Operation Dixie’ Lags; Union Maps New Plans To Get Million Members Organizers Need \$1 Million More: Sign Only 100,000; Eye Slump in Cotton Progress Report Due Today CIO’s ‘Operation Dixie’ Lags; It Maps New Plans to Get Million Members.” *The Wall Street Journal*, 19 Nov. 1946.

CIO is communist and the KKK will not tolerate communism.⁹ This opposition to Operation Dixie from white supremacists represents the fear they had if the CIO was actually successful in its attempts to unionize most of the Southern workforce, primarily because of its potential to dismantle Jim Crow. The KKK example is one area where race-based opposition is shown, in this case from a private organization.

When state power was used to punish striking workers and intimidate union drives, race played an integral role in doing so. Structural opposition came from police and Southern state governments. When governments clamped down on unionization and strikes, they punished striking workers but it was primarily black workers who faced the consequences. An example of this phenomenon can be seen in Little Rock, Arkansas. “The President of the Food, Tobacco, Agricultural, and Allied Workers of America (FTA), issued a similar appeal for funds after a black FTA worker in Arkansas, on strike against 55c and a 12-hour work day, was murdered by a strike breaker in Little Rock. Although having confessed to stabbing the man, the strikebreak was set free and, in his place, six union members were rushed to trial under charges of “attacking” a strikebreaker. All were black.”¹⁰ This episode played on the fears of white citizens based on generations of tropes and stereotypes against black citizens, generating even more opposition to unions as they supported “lawbreakers.” It also shows how governments reacted to growing union influence. They pushed the blame of lawbreaking on black workers while white workers were untouched, dividing workers on the usual racial lines. The use of race is clearly shown in these incidents as it appealed to white fears and prevented worker solidarity that crossed racial lines.

⁹ Southern Labor Archives. *KKK Answer to the CIO's "Operation Dixie."*

¹⁰ Griffith, 65.

Starting in 1947, organized labor faced enormous setbacks not only in the South but nationally. Congress passed the Taft-Hartley Act, which severely crippled unions' ability to strike and form a union while allowing states to introduce right to work laws — laws that force unions to represent workers that do not pay their dues to unions and therefore make it harder for unions to fight for the workers in a workplace. Southern states responded by instituting these restrictive measures, reinforcing an already hostile environment for organized labor. The shift of jobs from the union North to the nonunion South accelerated and undermined labor's position in the process. Facing legal restrictions, political opposition, and sustained racial division, the CIO accepted defeat and ended Operation Dixie in 1953.

The failure of Operation Dixie shows how racism is not merely a social issue but a powerful political and economic strategy used to divide workers and preserve existing hierarchies. By preventing solidarity between white and black workers, Southern economic and political elites maintained a status quo that kept wages down, labor weak, and preserved their power and wealth. This dynamic has had lasting consequences in the South as the region remains one of the least unionized in the United States. Many of the same tactics used against Operation Dixie — appeals to cultural division, political resistance to organized labor, and use of law to limit union power — persist in modern day debates and perceptions about workers' rights and labor unions. Recent unionization efforts in the South continue to confront these entrenched barriers. Operation Dixie serves as a reminder that the challenges facing labor are not new and efforts to unite workers depend on overcoming deep-rooted divisions that have historically undermined collective action.

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