



KENTUCKIANS FOR THE  
COMMONWEALTH

# HB 1

## An act to disempower workers

General Assembly 2017

# The racist roots of 'Right to Work' laws

*"Right-to-work" laws have their roots in extreme pro-segregationist and anti-communist elements in the 1940s South*

Excerpts from an article by Chris Kromm in "Facing South," the online magazine of the Institute for Southern Studies, December 13, 2012

The history of anti-labor "right-to-work" laws starts in Houston. It was there in 1936 that Vance Muse, an oil industry lobbyist, founded the Christian American Association with backing from Southern oil companies and industrialists from the Northeast.

As Dartmouth sociologist Marc Dixon notes in his fascinating history of the period, "The Christian American Association was the first in the nation to champion the 'Right-to-Work' as a full-blown political slogan."

Muse was a fixture in far-right politics in the South before settling into his anti-labor crusade. [His] causes included opposing women's suffrage, child labor laws, integration and growing efforts to change the Southern political order, as represented in the threat of Roosevelt's New Deal.

Muse's sister and associate at the Christian American Association, Ida Darden, openly complained about the First Lady's "Eleanor Clubs," saying they stood for "\$15 a week salary for all nig\_ \_ \_ house help, Sundays off, no washing, and no cleaning upstairs." As an afterthought, she added, "My n\_ \_ \_ \_ maid wouldn't dare sit down in the same room with me unless she sat on the floor at my feet!"

Allowing herself to go still further, she went on to say, "Christian Americans can't afford to be anti-Semitic, but we know where we stand on the Jews, all right."

The Association also suspected Catholics – which Dixon notes caused the downfall of their crusades in neighboring Louisiana.

But for far-right conservatives like Muse, as well as industry groups like the Southern States Industrial Council, labor – including black labor – posed an especially dangerous threat in Texas. Thanks to a burgeoning wartime economy, along with labor organizing drives spearheaded by the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) and, to a lesser extent, the American Federation of Labor, unions were rapidly growing in Texas. After hovering around 10 percent of the workforce during the 1930s, union membership exploded by 225 percent during the next decade.

Muse and the Christian American Association saw danger.

Not only were the unions expanding the bargaining power – and therefore improving the wages and working conditions – of working-class Texans, they



also constituted a political threat. The CIO in particular opposed Jim Crow and demanded an end to segregation. Unions were an important political ally to FDR and the New Deal. And always lurking in the shadows was the prospect of a Red Menace, stoked by anti-communist hysteria.

Working in concert with segregationists and right-wing business leaders, Muse and the Association swiftly took action. Their first step in 1941 was to push an "anti-violence" bill that placed blanket restrictions on public union picketing at workplaces. The stated goal was to ensure "uninterrupted" industrial production during World War II, although Texas had the fewest number of strikes in the South, and the law applied to all industries, war-related or not.

Their success with the "anti-violence" bill spurred Muse and the Christian American Association to push for – and pass – similar laws throughout the South. Mississippi adopted an anti-violence statute in 1942; Florida, Arkansas, and Alabama passed similar laws in 1943. It also emboldened them to take on a much bigger prize: ending the ability of labor groups to run a "closed shop," where union benefits extend only to union members.

In 1945, the Christian American Association – along with allies cemented in earlier anti-union legislative battles, including the Fight for Free Enterprise and the vehemently anti-union Texas Lt. Gov. John Lee Smith – introduced a right-to-work bill in Texas. It passed the House by a 60 to 53 margin, but pro-New Deal forces stopped it in the state senate. Two years later, thanks to a well-funded campaign from the Association and industry – and internal divisions between the craft-oriented AFL and the more militant CIO – Texas' right-

to-work bill was signed into law.

While working to pass right-to-work legislation in Texas, Muse and the Association took their efforts to Arkansas and Florida, where a similar message equating union growth with race-mixing and communism led to the passage of the nation's first right-to-work laws in 1944. In all, 14 states passed such legislation by 1947, when conservatives in Congress successfully passed Section 14(b) of the Taft-Hartley Act, enshrining the right of states to pass laws that allow workers to receive union benefits without joining a union.

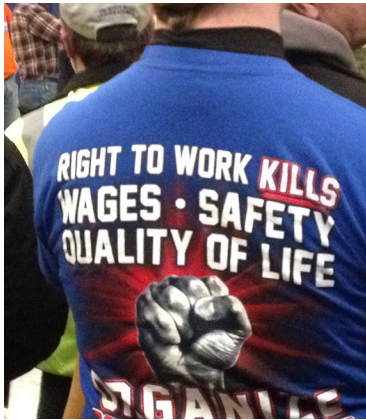
Civil rights leaders like Martin Luther King, Jr., who saw an alliance with labor as crucial to advancing civil rights as well as economic justice for all workers, spoke out against right-to-work laws; this 1961 statement by King was widely circulated during Michigan's recent labor battles:

*In our glorious fight for civil rights, we must guard against being fooled by false slogans, such as ‘right to work.’ It is a law to rob us of our civil rights and job rights. Its purpose is to destroy labor unions and the freedom of collective bargaining by which unions have improved wages and working conditions of everyone ... Wherever these laws have been passed, wages are lower, job opportunities are fewer and there are no civil rights.*

Interestingly, 11 years later, Kansas also passed a right-to-work law, with the support of Texas-born energy businessman Fred Koch, who also viewed unions as vessels for communism and integration. Koch's sons Charles and David went on to form the Tea Party group Americans for Prosperity, which pushed for the Michigan right-to-work measure, and is now advocating for states that already have such laws, like North Carolina and Virginia, to further enshrine them in their state constitutions.

And what about Muse? According to the Texas State Historical Association Muse died on October 15, 1950, at his Houston home, where his efforts with the Christian Americans had originated. At the time of his death he was working on a right-to-work amendment to the federal Constitution.

<sup>1</sup> "Southern Exposure," Stetson Kennedy, 1946



## House vote on HB 1

### Voting against Right to Work

Reps. Rocky Adkins, Danny Bentley, John Blanton, George Brown Jr., Tom Burch, McKenzie Cantrell, Matt Castlen, Will Coursey, Jeffery Donohue, Kelly Flood, Al Gentry, Derrick Graham, Jeff Greer, Chris Harris, Angie Hatton, Joni Jenkins, James Kay, Dennis Keene, Mary Lou Marzian, Russ Meyer, Charles Miller, Rick Nelson, Sannie Overly, Darryl Owens, Ruth Ann Palumbo, Rick Rand, Jody Richards, Steve Riggs, Dean Schamore, Attica Scott, Arnold Simpson, John Sims Jr., Kevin Sinnette, Wilson Stone, Tommy Turner, Gerald Watkins, Jim Wayne, Susan Westrom, Jill York

### Voting in favor of Right to Work

Reps. Lynn Bechler, Robert Benvenuti, Kim King, Adam Koenig, Stan Lee, Brian Linder, Rob Rothenburger, Kevin Bratcher, Larry Brown, Regina Bunch, John Carney, Tim Couch, Jim DeCesare, Myron Dossett, Jim DuPlessis, Daniel Elliott, Joseph Fischer, Ken Fleming, Chris Fugate, Jim Gooch Jr., David Hale, Mark Hart, Richard Heath, Toby Herald, Jeff Hoover, Kenny Imes, Dan Johnson, DJ Johnson, Donna Mayfield, Chad McCoy, David Meade, Michael Meredith, Suzanne Miles, Jerry Miller, Robby Mills, Phil Moffett, Tim Moore, C. Wesley Morgan, Kimberly Poore Moser, Jason Nemes, David Osborne, Jason Petrie, Phillip Pratt, Melinda Gibbons Prunty, Brandon Reed, Steve Riley, Bart Rowland, Steven Rudy, Sal Santoro, Jonathan Shell, Diane St. Onge, Jim Stewart, Walker Thomas, James Tipton, Ken Upchurch, Russell Webber, William Wells, Addia Wuchner

(Not voting: Dennis Horlander, Reggie Meeks, Marie Rader)

## Senate vote on HB 1

### Voting against Right to Work

Sens. Julian Carroll, Perry Clark, C.B. Embry Jr., Denise Harper Angel, Ray Jones, Morgan McGarvey, Gerald Neal, Dennis Parrett, Dorsey Ridley, Reginald Thomas, Johnny Ray Turner, Robin Webb

### Voting in favor of Right to Work

Sens. Julie Raque Adams, Ralph Alvarado, Joe Bowen, Tom Buford, Jared Carpenter, Danny Carroll, Rick Girdler, David Givens, Jimmy Higdon, Paul Hornback, Stan Humphries, Alice Forgy Kerr, Christian McDaniel, Stephen Meredith, Albert Robinson, John Schickel, Wil Schroder, Dan Seum, Brandon Smith, Robert Stivers, Damon Thayer, Stephen West, Whitney Westerfield, Mike Wilson, Max Wise

(Not voting: Sen. Ernie Harris)