

The origin of 'right-to-work' is a sad tale of money, racism, bigotry and hatred designed to shackle workers and their unions

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By **SHANNON DUFFY**

(AUTHOR'S NOTE: I'd like to ask readers to be aware two things in this article: First, notice the tactical similarities between those used by Vance Muse and those employed by the corporate demagogues that we face today. There are many – beginning with the use of branding. Muse repeatedly wrapped his vitriol in patriotic-sounding and religious-sounding names to shroud his hate-filled screeds in a cloak of respectability.

Second, be aware that there is some raw language in this article. Including such language was not made without a lot of thought. But these are direct quotes and, I believe, important for readers to understand the true mindset of the person who said them. This article's opening Muse quote occurred before a U.S. Senate investigative hearing in 1939 that was featured in a front-page story in the St. Louis Post-Dispatch on April 14 of that year.



Vance Muse (left) talks turkey with Texas lumber baron John Henry Kirby. They formed the Southern Committee to Uphold the Constitution in 1934 to try to stop Roosevelt's re-election.

"A white supremacist, an anti-Semite and a communist baiter, a man who beat on labor unions not on behalf of working people, as he said, but because he was paid to do so."

This is a description of the man who is called "The father of "right-to-work" — Vance Muse (1890-1950) by his own grandson.

By all accounts, Muse was a real son of a bitch. He spent his life planning and directing a series of campaigns to defeat legislative and social efforts to improve the lives of everyday Americans. He did all this not because of some misguided ideology but because he liked the money.

Muse, from north Texas, was working for the Fort Worth Chamber of Commerce in 1916 when the Adamson Act gave the eight-hour workday to railroad employees. Muse had worked tirelessly against that piece of federal legislation, and although the bill passed, timber and railroad magnate John Henry Kirby noticed his efforts.

Thus began a lifelong relationship with Kirby and his cronies.

During this time Muse also fought against women's suffrage as well as the elimination of child labor laws. But Muse wasn't just anti-women and anti-children; he also hated Jews and was active in the Committee for the Americanization of the Supreme Court, a group that formed because a Vienna-born Jew, Felix Frankfurter, was appointed to the Supreme Court.

A WALKING HATE CRIME

Every Muse campaign, by the way, was chock full of vitriol, and when it came to the rights of workers, the man was a walking hate crime.

Muse's words went well beyond the pale, and his barbs were not just hurtful, they were meant to ostracize, anger and inflame. Like other despots, those who knew him socially claimed that he could

The origin of 'right-to-work' is a sad tale of money, racism, bigotry and hatred designed to shackle workers and their unions - The L...
 be quite charming. But it has been written that a great deal of how he portrayed himself in polite society was all a ruse – like his exaggerated southern drawl and his 10-gallon hat, both of which he wore only when he traveled up “Nawth” on his fundraising trips.

In 1934, Muse and Kirby tried to deny Franklin Roosevelt’s upcoming re-nomination by forming the Southern Committee to Uphold the Constitution. The committee claimed that Roosevelt’s New Deal threatened the South’s racial order.

Time Magazine reported that the Southern Committee to Uphold the Constitution distributed “cheap pamphlets containing blurred photographs of the Roosevelt’s consorting with Negroes” accompanied by “blatant text proclaiming them ardent Negrophiles.”

Muse later justified his actions, saying: “I am a Southerner and for white supremacy ...It was a picture of Mrs. Roosevelt going to some n— meeting with two escorts, n—, on each arm.”
 (Author’s note: For the record, it was a photograph of First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt being escorted by two African-American ROTC officers on her way to address the Women’s Faculty Club at Washington’s Howard University.)

THE WEALTHY HATERS BEGAN TO TAKE NOTE

Such hate mongering brought Muse national attention and even more wealthy industrialists as clients and sponsors.

Following the passage of the National Labor Relations Act (NLRA), which gave Americans the federally protected right to form unions in their workplace, Muse’s wealthy clients began to feel the heat almost immediately.

In 1936, one year after the passage of the NLRA, Muse started what would become the lobbying front against unions in the United States: The Christian American Association, Inc. (Author’s note: *Nice trick, eh? Operating under that name meant they could spew their garbage and, at the same time, claim that Jesus was on their side! Also, by extension, it portrayed whatever they opposed, like unions, as anti-Christian.*)

In a short time the Christian Americans were up and running and, fueled by some wealthy northern industrialist brothers. (Author’s note: *Back then it was Lammot, Irene and Pierre du Pont ... but that’s another similarity to today; billionaires and corporate bosses are still bankrolling legislation aimed at keeping wages low and workers unable to organize.*)

The Christian Americans wasted no time targeting unions as enemies of the state; they told some whoppers about how terrible unions were – warning everyone about the terrible people they attracted – Jews, Catholics, Negroes and Communists.

SCARE MASTERS

The Christian Americans were masters at scare tactics. They claimed that unions were controlled by followers of Jewish Marxism, and warned of a modern-day Jewish Sanhedrin – a council of Jewish elders that would replace our secular American laws (Author’s note: *Sound familiar? How many neighbors or relatives can you think of that believe those stories the “alt media” plants on the web about Sharia Law? The fear-mongering that occurs today is nothing new; the rich and powerful have always used fear to divide the working class so that they don’t have to share their wealth and their power.*)

Now before we go any further, it's important to understand that before the National Labor Relations Act became law in 1935, labor unions represented about 10 percent of the American workforce and enjoyed very little legal protection. But after the NLRA became law, union membership exploded and, nationally, increased in sheer numbers more than fivefold by 1945.

Prior to 1955, there were two labor organizations in the United States: the American Federation of Labor (AFL), which was a coalition comprised mostly of craft unions, and the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), which was a coalition of unions that organized "industrially" (*Author's note: That is to say, they took everyone in an industry, regardless of skill or license*).

The AFL concerned itself mostly with negotiating wage increases and could be called the conservative wing of the Labor Movement, while the CIO was the more progressive labor coalition and saw itself fighting for a better way of life for its members both on and off the job.

Like industrial unions today, the CIO organized many low-wage workers and, in the 1930s and '40s, they took dead aim at the South. During that time, the CIO initiated campaigns to eliminate poll taxes so prevalent in southern states, and opposed Jim Crow laws – in fact, the organization issued public proclamations demanding an end to segregation.

THE BIRTH OF PHONY 'RIGHT-TO-WORK'

To Muse, in the late 1930s, as he watched unions scoring victory after victory, it meant only one thing: unions had to be destroyed. This was the pivotal moment in history when the so-called "right-to-work" movement was born – and it must be understood that "right-to-work" did NOT originate for workers to have the "liberty" to pay or not pay dues.

"Right-to-work" originated as a means to maintain Jim Crow labor relations in the South because union organizing remains among the most effective means of dismantling systemic racism.

Anyone who wishes to argue "right-to-work's" racist origins should first do a little research and read all those fliers and pamphlets produced by the "Christian" Americans that spelled out their racist and bigoted case for the law – and then get back to me.



William Ruggles of the Dallas Morning News came up with the idea and the phrase "right-to-work" on Labor Day in 1941.

Interestingly enough, the idea behind "right-to-work" did not originate with Muse. It came from a *Dallas Morning News* editorial on Labor Day, 1941. On that day, editorial writer William Ruggles called for a constitutional amendment prohibiting the closed, or union, shop.

It wasn't long before Muse called on Ruggles and received his blessing for the Christian Americans to use Ruggles' idea to try to outlaw contracts that required union membership after a union had been voted in by a majority of employees. Ruggles, a newspaperman who understood the power of words, even suggested the name for such legislation – "right-to-work."

SEGREGATION: THE ARGUMENT AGAINST UNIONS

Up until that point, much of Muse's anti-union efforts involved getting laws passed that were designed to outlaw strikes, pickets and demonstrations (also called "anti-violence bills") to ensure uninterrupted industrial production (*Author's note: Another similarity to today's attempts to stop people from exercising their First Amendment right to demonstrate. The right to push back against those in power was written into law by our founders. But that never stops corporate-controlled legislators from trying to shut us out or shut us up.*)

Muse's earlier "anti-violence" laws held strikers (but never strikebreakers or management) criminally liable for any violence that occurred on a picket line. But a "right-to-work" law was a new idea, and it called for a new type of campaign to sell it.

RTW: TO KEEP 'RACIAL ORDER'

Muse and his Christian Americans traveled throughout the South spreading their gospel of "right-to-work" and presenting it as a way to keep the racial order. They used segregationist views as their argument against unions.

The quote that was widely used – and for which Muse is famously known – warned that having a union meant: "From now on, white women and white men will be forced into organizations with black African apes whom they will have to call 'brother' or lose their jobs."

In 1944, in Arkansas and Florida, Muse and his followers ran a campaign that equated union growth with race mixing and communism. Sadly, their efforts were successful and led to the passage of the nation's first "right-to-work" laws that same year.

AND THE FLOOD BEGAN

Other southern states followed quickly and by 1947, when conservatives in Congress 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, 14 states had already voted for it.

After a while, Muse was getting mixed press but he always doubled down. Responding to criticism in 1945, he said: "They call me anti-Jew and anti-n— Listen, we like the n— – in his place. Our ("right-to-work") amendment helps the n—; it does not discriminate against him. Good n—, not those Communist n— Jews! Why some of my best friends are Jews. Good Jews."

Vance Muse died in 1950 at his home in Houston. At the time of his death, he was working on a "right-to-work" amendment to the U.S. Constitution.

RACISM, IGNORANCE HAD THEIR WAY

Over time, racism and ignorance had their way, and "right-to-work" laws became the law of the land in our southern states. Still, to this day there exist pockets of enlightenment and resistance where people understand how the economic system is rigged against them and band together for mutual aid and protection (*Author's note: My own union activist training began in the 1980s in the RTW state of Alabama*).

The fire down South does not burn as bright as it once did, but it has not gone out. Those states have had courageous and inspiring leaders emerge along the way that remained true to their values and championed the unions' cause.

'TO ROB US OF OUR RIGHTS'

Of all those, none said it better than the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. when he said: "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 our 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."



THE MARTIN LUTHER KING Human Rights Award Banquet, hosted by the Coalition of Black Trade Unionists (CBTU) St. Louis Chapter, will be held Monday, Jan. 15, at SMART Sheet Metal Workers Local 36 Union Hall, 2329 Chouteau Ave. in St Louis.

GOING FORWARD

So – the “right-to-work” movement was designed to weaken unions in order to keep the South segregated. It has racist origins.

Am I saying, then, that anyone today who is in favor of “right-to-work” is a racist? No, I am not saying that. But I do think that it’s important to know, as you set out on a path, just who it was that paved that path and in whose footsteps you’re walking.

It’s important to know how and why things came about and to be smart enough not to fall for some false argument just because it uses high-sounding words like “freedom” or “liberty.” Those are wonderful words, to be sure. But we should always understand and think about the real meaning of words and what is often lurking behind them.

Finally, it’s important to ask yourself who actually profits from “right-to-work?” Sure, if you opt out of the union at your workplace, you might save a few bucks – for a while, anyway.

But you could wind up losing a lot more than that once the union goes away.

Imagine how the RTW model would work in another setting

Pretend for a moment that you own a restaurant and the law says you have to allow everyone into your restaurant and let everyone order something off the menu. You also have to allow everyone to eat but, when the time comes to pay the bill, you’re not allowed to collect any money that an individual owes for his or her meal unless that person who ate the meal chooses to pay.

How profitable do you think your restaurant would be? How long do you think your restaurant would remain in business?

So, you see, it shouldn’t be any mystery what “right-to-work” laws were actually designed to do. It’s never been about having a choice. It’s always been about kneecapping unions and their members.

RESIST! FIGHT BACK!

The people who reap the profits from the phony “right-to-work” are the owners of the business where you work, those who control the factories and hotels and media chains and fast-food restaurants, etc. They don’t want you joining together with your co-workers and building power. They want you to be isolated and on your own because, that way, you’re easier to control.

Don’t be easy to control. Resist! Fight back!

How do we fight back?

For starters, unions should understand that there are many in our midst that have no idea about the good that unions bring about. And these people will vote on the “right-to-work” referendum in 2018. I already hear Labor leaders planning how we should frame the issue with our members, and that’s great, but what I don’t hear is how we intend to talk to the other 91 percent of the workers in our state who aren’t in a union – and it seems to me that we need to get busy.

Someone needs to enlighten them about all the positives that come from banding together for mutual aid and protection, because if we don’t tell them about unions, the other side will.

And our message can’t just be a bunch of slick commercials and radio spots with uplifting music, because the other side will have its own slick commercials and radio spots with uplifting music. All the competing noise may just cause voters to tune out.

FACE-TO-FACE IS THE KEY

We must talk to people face-to-face.

Ours is a powerful message, and it needs to be conveyed in a powerful way. And, while we do this, we should keep in mind that some perceive unions as exclusive or elitist. We should be acutely aware of racial injustice and racial insensitivity and have intentional conversations around the issue of race that challenge us and push us out of our comfort zones.

For some of our unions, particularly those with few minority members, this might not be easy – success seldom is – but our organizations will be better for it. And we shouldn't limit our community outreach. We need to think strategically about involving ALL the communities that don't live like – or look like – we do.

Our message should point out that for those seeking equity, a union contract offers the best form of protection against all forms of bias and bigotry – be it race, religion, gender, sexual orientation or sexual identity.

We can't merely offer lip service or perform some empty gesture in an attempt to win votes – we need to build real relationships. And in doing so, we will build real power.

So don't be fooled by clever wordplay; be aware of what this issue is really about and what is actually at stake for your future.

Join with us and become part of something that's bigger than just yourself; something that goes back generations – centuries even – and something noble and true. And if, in the past, you had an axe to grind about unions because you felt they don't always look like you, please take time to learn more about us.

Truly good work is being done to increase opportunities for those formerly overlooked. Unions now target training and

apprenticeship programs to women and minorities, and as an example, created the BUD (Building Union Diversity) Program in the building trades. One needs only to look at the incredible outreach being performed by the Eastern Missouri Laborer's District Council and the Painters District Council 58 to realize that Labor has, indeed, turned a corner.

Am I saying that unions are perfect? No, but organizations run by humans seldom are.

You might also be interested to know that some of the more exciting and progressive leaders emerging in our Labor Movement are members of minority communities. And, lest you think that your job is one that couldn't be organized, you should be aware that most of our growth in recent years has been in industries not traditionally associated with unions.

Today's job landscape is drastically changing; the typical worker is no longer "Joe Sixpack." It's "Juanita Sixjobs."

SOLIDARITY IS THE KEY

And make no mistake – just like back in the days of Vance Muse, workers are still being exploited. The need for unions is every bit as great today as it was 80 years ago. Some things never change!

So pay attention to the power structure in your workplace, and try to understand what steps you can take to improve your lot. Strive to become the best provider you possibly can for your family and loved ones. Stand up for yourself and for your co-workers; have each other's back.

And remember that we are always strongest when we stand together.

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