



FEBRUARY 22, 2018

Vance Muse and the Racist Origins of Right-to-Work

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JANUS V. AFSCME



**This is part of ACSblog's Symposium on Janus v. AFSCME*

The Right-to-Work movement is hoping that the U.S. Supreme Court in the upcoming *Janus v. AFSCME* case will invalidate closed shop arrangements among public employee unions. If the Court does so, it will cripple public employee unions and give Right-to-Work the greatest triumph in its seventy-seven year history. Although Right-to-Work forces will hail victory as a triumph for individual workers, an examination of the origins of Right-to-Work suggests that closed shop laws were intended to maintain Jim Crow labor relations and prevent workers from challenging the prerogatives of racist plantation owners and industrialists.

No one was more important in placing Right-to-Work on the conservatives' political agenda than Vance Muse of the Christian American Association, a larger-than-life Texan whose own grandson described him as “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.”^[1]

The idea for modern Right-to-Work laws did not originate with Muse. Rather it came from *Dallas Morning News's* William Ruggles, who on Labor Day 1941 published an editorial calling for the national prohibition on the closed shop. Muse visited Ruggles soon thereafter and secured the writer's blessing for the Christian American Association to launch a campaign to outlaw contracts that required employees to belong to unions. Ruggles even suggested to Muse the name for such legislation—Right-to-Work.^[2]

Muse had long made a lucrative living lobbying throughout the South on behalf of conservative and corporate interests or, in the words of one of his critics, “playing rich industrialists as suckers.” Over the course of his career, he fought women's suffrage, worked to defeat the proposed constitutional amendment prohibiting child labor, lobbied for high tariffs, and sought repeal of the eight-hour workday law for railroaders.^[3]

But Muse first attracted national attention through his work with the Southern Committee to Uphold the Constitution, which sought to deny Roosevelt's re-nomination in 1936 on grounds that the New Deal threatened the South's racial

order. Among Muse's activities on behalf of the Southern Committee was the distribution of what *Time* called "cheap pamphlets containing blurred photographs of the Roosevelts consorting with Negroes" accompanied by "blatant text proclaiming them ardent Negrophiles." Muse later defended the action and the use of its most provocative photograph: "I am a Southerner and for white supremacy . . . It was a picture of Mrs. Roosevelt going to some nigger meeting with two escorts, niggers, on each arm." [4]

In 1936, on the heels of the Southern Committee's failure to deny Roosevelt's nomination, Muse incorporated the Christian American Association to continue the fight against the New Deal, offering up a toxic mix of anti-Semitism, racism, anti-Communism, and anti-unionism. Muse and his allies considered the New Deal to be part of the broader assault of "Jewish Marxism" upon Christian free enterprise. The Christian American Association's titular head, Lewis Valentine Ulrey, explained that after their success in Russia the "Talmudists" had set out to conquer the rest of the world and that they had succeeded in the United States with the enactment of Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal. Vance Muse voiced the same anti-Semitic ideas in much simpler terms: "That crazy man in the White House will Sovietize American with the federal hand-outs of the Bum Deal—sorry, New Deal. Or is it the Jew Deal?" [5]

By the early 1940s, Muse and his Christian American Association allies, like many southern conservatives, focused their wrath on the labor movement, especially the unions associated with the Congress of Industrial Organizations that were organizing sharecroppers and challenging the legal underpinnings of white supremacy. The Christian American Association solicited wealthy southern planters and industrialists for funds to help break the "strangle hold radical labor has on our government" through the enactment of anti-union laws. The Christian American Association warned that the CIO—which had become shorthand for Jewish Marxist unions—was sending organizers to the rural South to inflame the contented but gullible African-American population as the first step in a plot to Sovietize the nation. [6]



Muse and the Christian Americans initially had little luck selling their Right-to-Work amendment but did have success peddling a pre-packaged anti-strike law to cotton plantation owners and industrialists first in Texas and then later in Mississippi and Arkansas. This law made strikers, but not strikebreakers or management, criminally liable for any violence that occurred on the picket line. For a fee, Muse and his organization would lobby legislators and mobilize public support through newspaper advertisements, direct mail campaigns, and a speakers' bureau. In Arkansas, Muse and the Christian Americans portrayed the anti-strike measure as a means to allow "peace officers to quell disturbances and keep the color line drawn in our social affairs" and promised that it would "protect the Southern Negro from communistic propaganda and influences."^[7]

The planter-controlled Arkansas Farm Bureau Federation and allied industrialists were so pleased with the Christian American Association's success in passing the anti-strike measure that they agreed to underwrite a campaign in 1944 to secure a Right-to-Work amendment for the Arkansas constitution. This placed Arkansas alongside Florida and California as the first states where voters could cast ballots for Right-to-Work laws. While Muse and the Christian Americans helped with the campaigns in California and Florida, they led the one in Arkansas.^[8]

During the Arkansas campaign, the Christian Americans insisted that Right-to-Work was essential for the maintenance of the color line. One piece of literature warned that if the amendment failed "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." Similarly, the Arkansas Farm Bureau justified its support of Right-to-Work by citing organized labor's threat to the Jim Crow order. It accused the CIO of "trying to pit . . . black against white."^[9]

In November 1944, Arkansas and Florida became the first states to enact Right-to-Work laws (California voters rejected the measure). In the wake of the Arkansas victory, Muse half-heartedly denied the racist and anti-Semitic origins of Right-to-Work: "They call me anti-Jew and anti-nigger. Listen we like the nigger—in his place Our [Right-to-Work] amendment helps the nigger; it does not discriminate against him. Good niggers, not those Communist niggers. Jews? Why some of my best friends are Jews. Good Jews."^[10]

It is not coincidental that Right-to-Work first took root in the Jim Crow South. In those states, few blacks could cast free ballots, poll taxes prevented most working-class whites from voting, election fraud was rampant, and political power was concentrated in the hands of an elite. Right-to-Work laws sought to make it stay that way, to deprive the least powerful of a voice, and to make sure that workers remained divided along racial lines. It would be an incredible irony if, in the name of worker rights, the Supreme Court incorporates Right-to-Work into the U.S. Constitution.

[1] Vance Muse [III], "Making Peace with Grandfather," *Texas Monthly* (February 1986): 116.

[2] George N. Green, "Establishing the Texas Far Right, 1940-1960," in *The Texas Right: The Radical Roots of Lone Star Conservatism*, ed. David O'Donald and Kyle G. Wilkison (College Station: Texas A&M Press, 2014), 90-91; Cheryl Hall, "DMN Writer Coined term 'Right to Work,' Opposed Forced Union Membership," *Dallas Morning News*, July 12, 2010, www.dallasnews.com (accessed July 6, 2016); "William Ruggle's Labor Day editorial on the Right to Work," *National Institute for Labor Relations Research*, www.nilrr.org (accessed July 6, 2016).

[3] Walter Davenport, "Savior From Texas," *Collier's* 116 (August 18, 1945): 13, 79-82; Stetson Kennedy, *Southern Exposure* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, 1946), 251; John Roy Carlson, *The Plotters* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1946), 271 (suckers quotation).

[4] "Black on Blacks," *Time*, April 27, 1936, pp. 12-13; Vance Muse [III], "Making Peace with Grandfather," *Texas Monthly* (February 1986): 142 (Muse quotation);

[5] Davenport, "Savior From Texas," 79; Victor Reisel, "Let's Look at Labor: IV. How to Choke Unions," *The Nation* 157 (July 31, 1943): 124 (Ulrey quotation); Vance Muse [III], "Making Peace with Grandfather," *Texas Monthly* (February

1986): 116 (Muse quotation).

[6][6] Vance Muse to E. W. Montgomery, August 20, 1941 (strangle hold quotation), series 3, subseries 1, box 114, James Eastland Papers, Archives and Special Collections, University of Mississippi Libraries, Oxford; *The Christian American* (newsletter), August 1941, *ibid*.

[7] Stetson Kennedy, *Southern Exposure* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, 1946), 250 (peace officers quotation); Untitled pamphlet sent to Christian American Association supporters and signed by Vance Muse (Secretary-Treasurer) and Lewis Valentine Ulrey (chairman), reprinted in *Fort Smith Labor News*, October 29, 1943, p. 1 (protect quotation).

[8] The Christian American Association documented the start of the Right-to-Work movement in Arkansas in a pamphlet titled “Arkansas Travels.” This pamphlet was serialized in the *Fort Smith Union News* from January 4 through May 17, 1944.

[9] Stetson Kennedy, *Southern Exposure*, 84 (apes quotation); “‘Lastus with the Leastus’ (An Editorial),” *Arkansas Farm Bureau Press* (March 1945), p. 2 (black again white quotation).

[10] Walter Davenport, “Savior From Texas,” 82.

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