Two-handed Fighting: Rhetorical Approaches to the Presidential Election of 1936 in The Advance and American Federationist

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TWO-HANDED FIGHTING: RHETORICAL APPROACHES TO THE PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION OF 1936 IN THE ADVANCE AND AMERICAN FEDERATIONIST

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Introduction

Since the founding of the United States, various groups have sought to claim the mantle of "American" for themselves. Organized labor is certainly no exception; throughout its history, labor has sought to cast itself as a force both stabilizing and liberating, a force that could change society without overthrowing it. In 1936, in the midst of the most crippling depression in the nation's history, labor sought not only to call itself "American," it sought to reform America itself. By allying itself with Franklin Delano Roosevelt and the New Deal Democrats, labor hoped to create a new society where labor, business and government formed a "tripartite" system in which equity and liberty were the rule rather than the exception.

Workers certainly had a large stake in the election. The gains workers had made under the first Roosevelt administration were unparalleled; thanks to the National Industrial Relations Act of 1935, labor had, for the first time, the sanction of government. As a result, American labor had achieved the most spectacular organizing victories in its history.1 To many union leaders, the reelection of Roosevelt was "absolutely critical to their success."2

Labor responded to Roosevelt's combination of rhetoric and action. In the summer of 1936, CIO head John L. Lewis and Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America General President Sidney Hillman formed Labor's Non-Partisan League (LNPL) to mobilize working-class support for Roosevelt. Forming an independent

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1 Steve Babson, The Unfinished Struggle: Turning Points in American Labor, 1877-Present (Oxford: Rowan & Littlefield, 1999), 86.
organization allowed Lewis and Hillman to coordinate support for the Democrats without being forced to subordinate labor goals by bringing their organization under the aegis of the Democratic Party.

But the election of 1936 was a watershed moment for all Americans. The federal government had swelled to an unprecedented size, tripling the national budget from 1929-1936 and increasing government’s share of gross national product from three percent to ten percent. Roosevelt had placed himself at the head of a new Democratic majority that was seen as the party of mercy and caring, contrasted with the cold economic calculations of Herbert Hoover’s laissez-faire policies. The sweeping changes Roosevelt had instituted made the election as climactic as any in American history; one historian has labeled the 1936 presidential election “as close to a plebiscite as any other in American history.” Clearly, the results of the election of 1936 would help direct the future of the nation like few other events could.

In his quest for reelection, Roosevelt used the language of Americanism to attract all Americans to the Democratic Party, “reclaiming the word ‘freedom’ from conservatives and making it a rallying cry for the New Deal.” Roosevelt also tailored his Americanist language to the desires of labor, comparing George Washington’s struggle against “royalists who held special privileges from the crown” to his own battle with “economic royalists…who sought to regiment the people, their labor, and their property.”

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3 Babson, The Unfinished Struggle, 91.
Clearly, the election of 1936 was a key moment in American history, and it was discussed in the rhetoric of Americanism. This paper is an exploration of how two prominent labor publications used the language of Americanism to promote labor goals and support Roosevelt’s reelection. The first publication is *The Advance*, the official newspaper of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America (ACWA). Edited by Sidney Hillman and the executive board of the ACWA, *The Advance* was an aggressively partisan publication filled with cartoons and grandiose statements about the future of labor. The ACWA itself was, at the time, affiliated with the American Federation of Labor (AFL), but it was closely tied to John L. Lewis’s Committee for Industrial Organization, so its stridency is perhaps unsurprising. References to Americanism are constant and pervasive—American flags are draped around photographs of Roosevelt. Comparisons between the struggles of 20th-century labor and those of the Founding Fathers were commonplace. *The Advance* wore its Americanism on its sleeve.

The other journal is precisely that—a professional journal. *American Federationist* is the official publication of the American Federation of Labor. Edited by AFL President William Green, *American Federationist* featured almost no cartoons, and, for that matter, little outright electoral content whatsoever. But Green, also used the language of Americanism to help push labor’s agenda and encourage the election of
sympathetic candidates, albeit in a manner far more subtle than that of *The Advance*—
and all despite his avowed efforts to keep the AFL nonpartisan. ⁷

Through an analysis of these two journals, several critical commonalities can be
found. Most obviously, both publications extolled the virtues of a strong organized labor
movement and criticized the avarice of big business. Both approved of the New Deal
and its use of government to assist labor and restrain business from overrunning
American society. Both publications were vicious in their criticism of the Supreme
Court's decision in *Schechter Poultry Corp. V. United States* (1935), in which the Court
overturned the National Industrial Recovery Act. ⁸

But significant differences existed as well. For one thing, it takes a mere glance
to discern that *The Advance* was far more strident in its criticisms and recommendations
than was *American Federationist*. This was due mostly to differences in rhetorical
approaches. Throughout 1935 and 1936, *The Advance* used the language of
Americanism to praise labor, criticize business, and, ultimately, to make a case for the
reelection of Roosevelt in 1936. The ACWA's rhetoric indicates that it saw a completely
new society on the horizon, a society in which, as one writer famously put it, "labor
would rule." Key to this new society was a redefinition of Americanism, attainable only
through the reelection of Franklin Roosevelt.

William Green, on the other hand, used *American Federationist* to advance the
very particular legislative agenda of industrial democracy—a fusion of labor, business

⁸ C. Herman Pritchett, "Schechter Poultry Corp. V. United States," in *The Oxford Companion to the
and government in planning the economy and running the government. Green was not so much concerned with who sits behind the desk in the Oval Office as he was with promoting the AFL's legislative agenda. As the election drew near and it became obvious that Roosevelt was the only viable candidate who would pursue such an agenda, Green too threw his support behind Roosevelt.

Through their goals and rhetorical approaches may have been much different, both *The Advance* and *American Federationist* used nationalist language to promote their goals in the election of 1936. In the wake of their success, both journals reflected on the election and its significance, looking to the bright future they had helped to create. Though no new America emerged, and industrial democracy remains elusive to this day, an analysis of these two journals gives an invaluable look into the priorities and rhetoric of both the ACWA and the AFL.
Part One: The Rhetoric of Americanism in The Advance

We hold that the defense of labor rights and the advancement of labor's economic interests are intimately bound up with the preservation of democracy in the United States.⁹

Sidney Hillman, president of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers Union of America, was but one of the millions of organized workers who threw their support behind Franklin Roosevelt in the 1936 presidential election. For Hillman, the ACWA, and millions of others, FDR represented not only concrete legislation such as the National Industrial Recovery Act and the Wagner Act; Roosevelt was a tangible symbol of what labor viewed as an impending democratic renaissance, a restoration of the promises of the Declaration of Independence, promises that had been stolen by “plutocrats” and “Tory industrialists.” In the eyes of the ACWA and other unions, Roosevelt was not just reclaiming liberty—he was forging a new society in which labor, working side-by-side with government, would reclaim the rights of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

The 1936 election is widely acknowledged as a watershed moment in American history, but it was perhaps even more significant for labor than for the general population. It was labor that had cheered when Roosevelt’s NIRA bill passed, labor that had lamented its dissolution by the Supreme Court and labor that held hope for even more sweeping legislation in the future. Not surprisingly, then, labor publications like The Advance, the official newspaper of the ACWA, were filled with the rhetoric of nationalism, with historical allusions and millennial predictions.

In the year leading up to the 1936 election, *The Advance* built a core of central ideals centered on democracy: labor’s role in preserving it, capital’s role in destroying it, the ways in which its promises had gone unfulfilled, the importance of the election in protecting it and the centrality of Roosevelt to continuing it. From January 1935 until the ACWA’s official endorsement of Roosevelt, *The Advance* built up a core “vocabulary” of nationalist language, and by the time of the election almost two years later, the editors were able to draw on that language for additional rhetorical power.

The rhetoric used in *The Advance* cast labor’s opponents as tyrants standing in the way of the new way of life labor was looking to provide. The arguments used in the newspaper can be divided into four major areas, all focusing on labor as the ideal expression of modern democracy. The first is the central role organized labor plays in a vibrant democracy. The second is a series of condemnations of capitalists and reactionaries, both in government and the private sector, as dangers to democracy. Third, the ACWA argued that the promises of American democracy, embodied in the Declaration of Independence and in the ideals of America’s greatest leaders, had gone unfulfilled for the great majority of people. Finally, the ACWA portrayed Roosevelt as an almost-messianic figure, the only man capable of winning battles for labor. All of these rhetorical techniques combined to give an air of desperate immediacy and millennial intensity to the 1936 election.

I. “The new nation of the United States”: Labor’s Role in a Democracy

The Amalgamated’s first task was to convince its readers that they not only had a stake in wages, hours and benefits, but represented a vital center of American democracy.
This was probably the easiest rhetorical mission of *The Advance*: workers likely to read the monthly newspaper were not likely to doubt the importance of unions to the life of the nation. Nonetheless, the editors of *The Advance* made several very strong arguments for labor as a defining portion of a functioning republic. They did so in two ways: first, by labeling unions as paragon of peace, cooperation and international solidarity; and second, by fitting organized labor directly into the American system of democracy.

Unions were constantly praised in the pages of *The Advance* for the countless blessings they bestowed upon their members. More important even than higher wages and safer working conditions were the spiritual benefits of working-class solidarity. One editorial claimed that unions were a sort of social “school” that prepared their members for effective citizenship: “organized workers receive from their own collective experiences a high training in social thinking, social responsibilities, and a sense of what is socially right and wrong.”

But perhaps even more important was the comparative moral and spiritual degradation to which unorganized workers subjected themselves. “The unorganized worker humiliates and degrades himself in his efforts to please his employer, in order to hold his job,” the article continued. Unions were an internationally unifying method for workers to retain—or regain—the dignity that had been taken from them by capitalist oppression.

Sometimes the connection to international unionism was more apparent. According to Sidney Hillman, labor “constitutes the major part of the population in this country and in other countries.” Already Hillman was attempting to make a connection

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11 Ibid.
with international unionism, forcing his readers to think globally rather than locally, to open their minds to the international struggles of labor, not just those on their own shop floor. But he went on to explain that organized labor also represents a buffer against the spread of capitalism, which, "caused by the contraction of employment at home," would try to find "a way out abroad." In so doing, capitalism causes "international competition, creates rivalry, generates fear and jealousies, breeds ill will, [and] causes war." So unions did not only protect workers at home; they protected entire nations abroad, serving as a bulwark against the violent influences of international capitalism.

Others went farther than Hillman in describing labor's role in the world. One contributor wrote that labor was "the logical heir to all the other groups which have ruled this world since the beginning of time," and assured Advance readers that "Labor will rule us during the next two or three centuries." This sort of language, presaging a resurgence of labor to the fore of world affairs, would become central to the Amalgamated's later assertion that the election of Franklin Roosevelt would signal a new era for democracy and liberty. Not only would the world finally be at peace, it would have labor at its head. Working people—producers—would take their rightful place atop the global stage, and the money-changers would simply become extinct.

But perhaps even more important than building a sense of worker solidarity was demonstrating to workers the ways in which they were integral to democracy at home—especially with a key election looming. The opening quote of this paper, Hillman's claim

that "the defense of labor rights and the advancement of labor's economic interests are intimately bound up with the preservation of democracy," is emblematic of the language throughout *The Advance* that proudly displays the banner of labor at the head of the parade of democracy. Indeed, John L. Lewis stressed in another article that workers and workers alone could protect the nation's institutions: "there must be industrial democracy in this nation, if this nation is to survive in its present form." International solidarity was an admirable goal, but preserving liberty for Americans was the major task of the unions.

By the time of the election, labor's importance to democracy was being discussed in broad terms. One article, entitled "People Against Dollars: Three Great Crises In American History," was proclaiming that labor was the defender of liberty during the Depression (which was the third "Great Crisis," after the Revolution and the Civil War). "Organized into our strong unions in the factories, we now sally forth to test our strength on the political field. We are marching with the masses of the American people, we are the new nation of the United States..." Labor was not just going to elect Roosevelt, it was going to effect a sea change in American politics. A new era was coming, in which labor would be "the new nation," owning its fair share of industry. Hillman and the ACWA knew that to effect such a change, they must make workers confident in their own centrality to democracy.

It was through a combination of arguments that the ACWA sought to convince its members of their own importance. On the one hand, traditional working-class rhetoric stressing international solidarity and worker cooperation was used to encourage workers

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to see their place in the global struggle against the abuses of capital. At the same time, however, specific arguments relating to labor’s power in the United States, and its role in protecting and preserving democracy at home, were used to keep workers focused on the task at hand—which, ultimately, would become the reelection of Franklin Roosevelt.

II. “So bitter and blind”: The Fight Against Reactionaries

Another component of the rhetorical battle waged by The Advance was its vitriolic condemnation of those it labeled “reactionaries” or “Tories.” Big business was, unsurprisingly, the recipient of the most criticism, both in terms of quantity of words and quality of venom. But the ACWA did not spare other groups that stood in the way of labor’s march toward a new America. The Advance attacked three major anti-labor groups: capitalists, conservative organizations such as the American Liberty League and anti-labor government officials.

Big business was the constant target of attacks in the pages of The Advance. Much of the time, the ACWA writers did not even write in terms of “Big Business” or “capital,” preferring instead to use terms like “plutocrat” and “Tory” (the latter, of course, striking an important chord in the heart of any union member familiar with American history). Some of the attacks were almost hysterical in their rage. Charles W. Ervin, author of a regular column on affairs in Washington, at one point asserted that “hatred of Roosevelt is so bitter and blind...that these Tories have shown that they will hesitate at nothing in an attempt to destroy him.”

Already the ACWA was beginning to link Roosevelt’s future to the future of the

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union; the success or failure of FDR at the polls would be the success or failure of organized labor (and vice-versa for Big Business).

Another of Ervin's attacks seems nearly incomprehensible in its accusations. Ervin wondered what would happen to a President who attempted to push through legislation even more progressive than the New Deal. He speculated that "there is every probability that a more radical president would have been assassinated by the plutocracy, which has never hesitated at murder by hired thugs." While the idea of a group of rich white men gathered in a room filled with cigar smoke and plotting the murder of an idealistic president may be a romantic one, it is does not seem at all probable. However, Ervin elaborated and reminded readers that there have been times that the "plutocrats" have indeed resorted to "murder by hired thugs." He assures dubious readers that to him, "this is no mere theory. I was in my late twenties when the Battle of Homestead took place...." Obviously, some members of the unions were absolutely convinced of capital's opposition to the Roosevelt-labor alliance—or, rather, to the new birth of democracy and equality it might produce.

As with countless other political issues, much of the rhetorical fight against big business was conducted visually, through the use of political cartoons. Though often lacking in subtlety, they offer a genuine insight into the minds of the Amalgamated's leadership. One two-page spread screamed that "big business wants to be free—FREE to exploit women and children—FREE to cut wages and lengthen hours—FREE to fix prices of farm

17 Ervin used the term "hired thugs" most likely in the context of industrial battles like that at Homestead and Ludlow, but he was also in all likelihood serious about the possibility of an attempt on Roosevelt's life. Though the idea may seem sensationalistic, recall that Senator Huey Long was assassinated in late 1935, and Chicago's New Deal mayor Anton Cermak was killed in 1933 by a bullet meant for Roosevelt. For more, see Jacqueline Jones, et.al. Created Equal. A Social History of the United States Vol. II, p. 758, and Lizabeth Cohen. Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919-1939, p. 255.
and children—FREE to cut wages and lengthen hours—FREE to fix prices of farm products—and FREE to ruthlessly rob the rest of us!” As if there could be any doubt as to the counterpoint of such evil, the cartoon helpfully reminds us at the bottom that “Unions Want the People To Be Free.”19 In this case, big business is not only set apart from labor as being conservative and authoritarian; it is mocked in its ludicrous attempts to convince Americans that deregulation (the “freedom” of business) is important to preserving democracy.

Another cartoon similarly cuts straight to the heart of the issue. A giant businessman (we know he is a businessman because of his expensive suit, top hat, cigar and full belly) is holding a copy of the Constitution and holding a halting hand out to a dwarfed worker. The caption quotes the capitalist as saying “You can’t touch,” and elaborates, claiming that “capital considers the constitution its personal property.”20 Again, capital was portrayed as a monolithic force that attempted to control the Constitution and twist it for its own perverted ends. Labor, on the other hand, was seeking to use the Constitution to fulfill the promises of liberty and equality upon which America stands.

The mouthpiece of big business, the industrial lobby group known as the National Association of Manufacturers, was also accused of tyranny in the pages of The Advance. In a piece that was second in a series entitled “The Hall of Fame of American Reaction,” Charles Ervin characterized the NAM as being “officered and led by Tory industrialists who have

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opposed for years all legislation which...might even in the smallest degree better the condition of the workers.”

Such criticisms of capitalists and CEOs would be expected; what is more interesting is the claim that the NAM was foisting repression and autocracy on the American people. Ervin continued: “In attacking what planned economy the New Deal sought to bring about, they are attacking the very basis of our government as well.” Asserting that the forefathers created “anything but an unplanned government,” Ervin makes a strong connection between modern New Dealers and the framers of the Constitution; in doing so, he also draws a sharp contrast between the framers and the men who compose the National Association of Manufacturers.

Capitalists were but one of the ACWA’s targets. Perhaps even more dangerous than the power of big business was the insidious growth of conservative organizations. Groups like the American Liberty League (ALL) challenged labor’s rights to organize and bargain collectively, and just as labor organized drives to support Franklin Roosevelt in 1936, so too did the ALL for Republican Alf Landon. The “Liberty Leaguers,” as they were called, were seen as even more threatening than Big Business in some ways—though capitalists controlled much of the government, the rhetoric and ideology of groups like the American Liberty League were appealing to many Americans, and if the League was successful, it could turn the entire country against Roosevelt—and against labor.

Just as they mocked the rhetoric of “freedom” used by capitalists, the editors of The Advance scorned the moniker of the Liberty League. “Think of objecting to the Wagner

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22 Ibid.: 25.
labor act and having the impudence to call yourself a Liberty Leaguer!” argued Charles Ervin. Indeed, the hypocrisy of the Liberty League’s rhetoric was a favorite target of ACWA leaders: Louis Hollander, Co-Manager of the New York Joint Board, argued in a reprinted address that when a union conducted a strike, “the Liberty Leaguers want to be sure that the employers will have the ‘liberty’ of moving to another state in order to defeat the union.” Hollander also pointed out that “when the gentlemen of the Liberty League and their like speak of the Constitution, we must be aware that they have two constitutions in mind—one for the employers and financiers and one for the workers.”

Perhaps Charles Ervin said it best in “Who and What is the Liberty League?” “The American Liberty League,” he argued, “stands neither for the people of America nor for liberty.” In fact, Ervin’s article was part of a series entitled “The Hall of Fame of American Reaction.”

But it was not merely ideological and titular inconsistencies that the ACWA attacked. The Advance did not just portray the ALL as hypocritical; it was seen as downright dangerous. The ACWA’s Convention of 1936 issued a statement arguing that labor could not ignore “the menace of fascism which is implicit in the activities of such organizations as the American Liberty League.” The report was specific in its accusations: “the appeal to race prejudice, the flouting of the orderly processes of government...constitute a serious threat to the democratic institutions of the American people.”

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26 "The Two Major Decisions of the Cleveland Convention," The Advance XXII, no. 6 (June 1936): 3.
consistent: labor casts itself as the force of international solidarity and peace, contrasted with reactionary forces that engage in race-baiting to achieve their goals.

The ACWA reserved a special brand of vitriol for reactionaries in government. Those who had been elected or appointed to federal posts had a special duty to protect the people; to strike down labor legislation or vote in favor of business was a betrayal of democracy. In early 1935, after the Supreme Court struck down the National Industrial Recovery Act, the pages of *The Advance* were filled with fiery protests. "I, said the Supreme Court, I don't care what happens to the country, to the welfare of the millions of its workers, to the hungry children of the nation," argued one enraged editor. "I, the Supreme Court, neither know nor care [about labor's future] so long as my temple erected upon the dust of the dead stands out and up. I am the past, and for the past I stand."^27

Much like capitalists were portrayed as greedy, uncaring monsters and the ALL was depicted as fascist, the Supreme Court was constantly attacked as being reactionary and completely out of step with the true will of America. "The issue today," asserted an article entitled "Labor's Duty in the Present Crisis," "is whether or not the archaic and anti-social reactionary considerations of the small group of old men on the supreme bench is to be allowed to offset entirely the legitimately expressed will of the people of the United States."^28 In other words, the Supreme Court had betrayed the public trust by acting in a manner that was not consistent with the "legitimate will" of Americans.

Not surprisingly, the Supreme Court was also accused of being undemocratic. Louis Hollander assured workers that "the United States of America is a democracy and will

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remain a democracy as long as the American labor movement...will see to it... that social legislation, when enacted, shall not be destroyed by the United States Supreme Court."\(^{29}\)

Hollander’s somewhat dim view of America’s system of checks and balances was echoed by Charles Ervin, who argued without elaboration that “the power of the Supreme Court to decide what Congress is allowed to do or not to do is a usurped power.”\(^{30}\) Regardless of their grasp of judicial review, the editors and contributors of *The Advance* were united in their disgust at the Supreme Court’s ability strike down progressive New Deal legislation with apparent impunity.

The United States Chamber of Commerce was also frequently derided as a haven for capitalists and a stumbling block in the path of labor’s democratic resurgence. One of the more amusing articles in the annals of *The Advance* contained an anecdote in which a man visited his friend, a newspaperman who lived in Washington. The friend asked to be taken to the Capitol building, and was instead taken by the newspaperman to the Chamber of Commerce. “‘Why, where’s the dome?’” the friend asks. “‘Oh,’ said the newspaperman, ‘I thought you would like to see the real Capitol of the United States before we went to the historic one. This marble pile,’ said he, ‘is the United States Chamber of Commerce. It is from here that the country is really governed.’”\(^{31}\) The scribes of the ACWA portrayed the Chamber of Commerce as corrupt and undemocratic, just as they portrayed the Supreme Court. It is not hard to understand their frustration; in a time when they were seeking to

\(^{29}\) Hollander, "The Workers and the Constitution," 15.


build democracy, their union was being challenged by government officials who were appointed, not democratically elected.

Perhaps the most interesting fact noticed by The Advance was the banners of old ships that hung in the lobby of the Chamber of Commerce building. Charles Ervin, for one, was not surprised: “there is the flag of Cortez, who pillaged Mexico, taking everything he could lay his hands on and enslaving the natives. Then there is the banner of Pizarro, who went to Peru and destroyed the Inca civilization.” The metaphor is vivid and consistent with earlier arguments: because they are not democratically elected, the officials of the Chamber of Commerce were tantamount to conquistadores, brutal would-be dictators free to enslave entire peoples—just as they were attempting to enslave labor.

The ACWA clearly had an agenda for using organized labor to reform American democracy. Those who stood in their way were mercilessly cut down in the pages of The Advance. Capital’s greed and their hypocritical use of the Constitution to justify abuses of workers was skewered in both words and cartoons. The American Liberty League was described as a borderline fascist organization dangerous to the future of American democracy. Finally, officials in the Supreme Court and Chamber of Commerce—who were not democratically elected—were portrayed as reactionaries, anti-progressives, and even pillagers and pirates. The Amalgamated had no patience for anti-labor groups or officials who might interfere with its vision for a new democratic America.

\[32\] Ibid.
III. “An unrealized possession”: Labor, American History and the American Promise

The Advance made it abundantly clear on numerous occasions that the promises of the Declaration of Independence—namely, the inalienable rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness—had been stolen away by a “planless” economy run by plutocrats. In its assertions that America was no longer a land of the free, the ACWA made perhaps its strongest case for labor as the standard bearer of democracy. The fight to reclaim America’s traditions of liberty was, indeed, among the most common and aggressive topics of discussion in the pages of The Advance during 1935 and 1936, and would later help fuel the union’s strong endorsement of Roosevelt. The Amalgamated’s rhetoric was divided into several different arguments.

First and most basic was the claim that America was not a land of liberty and democracy, and that only labor could restore it to such a place. The second was a series of direct allusions to the Declaration of Independence, connecting labor to the ideals expressed in America’s founding document and detailing how those ideals had been destroyed by capital and could be restored by labor. Finally, the greatest amount of nationalist rhetoric was dedicated to directly connecting labor’s fight for democracy and equality with great leaders and events of American history.

The Great Depression was one of the greatest crises in the history of the American economy, and it is not surprising that labor tied economic concerns to their cries for democracy and liberty. Some of the criticism was directed at a simple lack of opportunity and harkened back to a time when owning property or even a small business was the ultimate dream of most Americans. “The laborer of today,” one article lamented, “has no hope of
being a small shop owner tomorrow." Another article claimed that "low paid workers in our country are no better off than the Chinese coolies when it comes to buying milk...Where then is that famous 'American standard of living' which we hear so much about?" Clearly, the collapse of the American economy was intensely felt by laboring people, and they deeply resented the lack of a traditional "American standard of living" to which, on some level, they had become accustomed.

One Advance reader contributed a letter that bemoaned the fate of his friend, an aging widow who fell ill and became unable to work. Her boss refused to give her any time off and she was fired. The article was entitled "Slavery Still Exists in this 'Land of the Free.'" Clearly, for members of the ACWA, the loss of the American dream was partially economic. The capitalist takeover of the government and economy—most dramatically depicted in the tale of the widow—was creating a plutocratic system that was not at all in line with the ideals of democracy and equality on which America was founded.

Other leaders discussed the loss of the American dream in terms of political freedom, and, in particular, labor's role in restoring it. The Advance was filled with references to the death of American ideals and the ways in which labor could resurrect them. "The American dream has and does exist in a very real way," argued one article. "Not that the dream has come to fruition," it continued, "in fact, a sober look at America quickly proves that...the most important parts of the dream have become less and less realizable." It is important to note that contrary to the claims of many conservatives at the time, labor (the ACWA, at least)

was not seeking to "destroy" America. The Amalgamated did believe in America, and the American dream; it just believed that such a nation and such a dream had been trampled by capital and had to be picked up again.

But how to pick it up? Not surprisingly, the Amalgamated assured its readers that labor was doing all it could to restore the American dream—and, in so doing, restore America to its rightful place as the beacon of democracy for the rest of the world. Indeed, *The Advance* repeatedly made it clear that labor was at the forefront of the fight to fulfill the American promise. "All of the parts of the American dream...are the goals that labor is striving for and fighting for."\(^{37}\) Once again, labor is placed at the head of the march to democracy; it is labor that is fighting for liberty, equality, peace, democracy and all of the other components of life that have come to be seen as collectively "American."

But labor was not just fighting for the American dream, it was fighting alone—mainly because no other sector of society was willing or capable of doing so. "The realization of the dream...can come only through the steady fighting and eventual winning of the battle by labor," argued one article. It even went a step further, making the strident claim that "no one else but labor will fight for the true reality of the dream."\(^{38}\) Labor had now set itself apart not just as the generals of the battle to reclaim democracy; unions had become the lone bulwark against further erosion of American liberty.

Some of the ACWA’s most powerful rhetoric was in the form of direct allusions to America’s most sacred document, the Declaration of Independence. The Declaration was referenced often in *The Advance* as a shining example of what Americans were capable of—

\(^{37}\) Ibid.: 12.  
\(^{38}\) Ibid.
and a damning example of how far the U.S. had strayed from the path of democracy and liberty set by the founders. In one of his dispatches from Washington, Charles Ervin argued that “the Declaration of Independence remains a proclaimed declaration of principles—principles that have not yet been put into practice.” This view of the Declaration as a beacon of freedom that had been extinguished by capitalist oppression was common in the pages of *The Advance*, although sometimes the commentary was more bitter. In a later article tracing the history and development of the Declaration, Ervin quipped that in 1935, “a reading of the Declaration sounds like a huge joke.” Such bitter statements are evidence of the sense of betrayal labor felt when reading documents like the Declaration, which promised life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness to every American.

But ultimately, the ACWA was not interested in rhetoric; they desired action to rectify the inequalities of modern society and restore the promises of the Declaration. “It is not enough that the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness be recognized in the abstract. This right...ought to be a dominant actuality of our way of life.” Such calls for freedom were usually accompanied by assertions that labor was the only body still capable of defending it. One article, tracing “Clothing Workers in the Run of American History,” concluded that, “to an overwhelmingly large part” of the population, the rights of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness remained “an unrealized possession.” It was only “labor’s fight for union recognition” that could “put the guiding principles of the Declaration into effect.”

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"Build Your America, Youth of the Union," *The Advance* XXII, no. 7 (July 1936): 1.

Sometimes, labor co-opted the language of the Declaration for themselves. The
ACWA, affiliated with the American Federation of Labor during the critical debates over
industrial unionism, followed the progress of the CIO with great interest. The Steel Workers
Organizing Committee, for example, was closely monitored because steel had long been a
refuge of anti-union bosses. When a group of steel workers issued what they entitled "The
Steel Workers' Declaration of Independence," The Advance reprinted the manifesto and used
it as an example of how workers could restore democracy and liberty to America, even
within industry. The document is, unsurprisingly, heavily influenced by the original
Declaration:

On July 4, 1776, the American people declared their independence of political
tyranny from which they had long suffered. They pledged themselves to protect the
right of all to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. But today we find the
political liberty for which our forefathers fought is made meaningless by economic
inequality. In the steel and other like industries a new despotism has come into
being.43

Such rhetoric allowed the ACWA to claim that they labor was indeed the standard bearer of
American democracy and would later aid in their push to reclaim America through the
election of Roosevelt.

Perhaps the most significant, and certainly the largest, amount of Americanist rhetoric
in The Advance made connections between the modern labor movement and events and
people from America's past. Much of the language centered on the betrayal of American
ideals by modern capitalism. Some of the language referred to specific proposals by colonial
leaders that labor still claimed as its own: In a section entitled "144 Years is a Mighty Long
time," Charles Ervin noted that it had been "144 years since Thomas Paine first proposed

43 "Steel Workers Adopt Declaration of Independence," The Advance XXII, no. 7 (July 1936): 3.
More often, however, the rhetoric was more abstract. In the same article, Ervin criticized leaders of both parties in Congress who would use historical figures for political gain:

all of them [in Congress] are 'beaters of the living with the bones of the dead.' In the case of the republicans the dead Abraham Lincoln was used. The democrats used the dead Thomas Jefferson. The followers of these political saints never seemed to sense for a moment that neither of these statesmen...would have been willing to support the tactics followed in the last generation and a half.45

Members of the ACWA clearly felt that the promises and labors of America's great leaders had gone unfulfilled. Once again, they argued that it was labor that would rise above the petty politics of Washington and the greed of the plutocrats and lead America into a new birth of freedom.

_The Advance_ convinced its members that they were the inheritors of a grand democratic tradition, the descendants of men who, while not necessarily labor leaders, where the finest examples of republican leadership America had ever produced. Abraham Lincoln's quote that "labor is prior to and independent of capital...Labor is the superior of capital and deserves the much higher consideration" was reprinted in _The Advance_ every few months, as if to remind workers that no matter how dominant capital seemed, they had the moral authority of Lincoln on their side. Union leaders, as will soon be demonstrated, could not resist comparing emancipation of African Americans to the coming "emancipation" of American workers from the chains of capitalism.46

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45 Ibid.
Colonial patriots were another favorite point of comparison for ACWA leaders. One article from August 1935 was entitled “Meet Union Organizer Paul Revere,” and detailed how Revere was the first “labor organizer” in America’s history: “The Paul Revere of old galloped on horse over New England’s countryside to arouse the colonists for a fight on the tyranny of King George,” the author noted; “the Paul Reveres of today are the active union workers and organizers.” These two Reveres shared a common goal: “to win with, by and for the American working people the battle for social and individual freedom and economic security.”

The rhetoric of the American Revolution was indeed difficult for the ACWA to resist, as it served the dual purpose of casting labor as patriotic and capital as tyrannical. “The enemy in the Revolutionary War of Independence was outside,” one article noted. “Not so is the case with the war for essential democracy and economic security... [but in 1936] the enemy is not a personal regime, not a handful of robber barons and their servants, but a vast and fully entrenched social and economic system.” Of course, using terms like “personal regime” and “robber barons,” the editors of The Advance managed to dredge up images—Homestead, Ludlow and others—with which all union members would have been familiar; such images were in addition to the already clear comparison of capital to King George’s monarchy.

Another article neatly summarized the point of view of The Advance on labor’s place in America, past and present. The author labels “3 great crises in American history.” The first was the American Revolution, waged against “land speculators and money changers,”

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48 “Build Your America, Youth of the Union,” 1.
the second was the "Civil War against chattel slavery." Already, The Advance had succeeded in placing class conflicts at the center of the Revolution (which was fought against money-grubbing English capitalists) and the Civil War (waged to eradicate slavery, with a strong connection to the fight against modern "wage slavery"). The third crisis was the Great Depression, a particular case which required particular action. To wit: a "battle of ballots" must be waged against "gold-centered and Wall Street-rooted" plutocrats. In this case, the stakes were even higher than independence or emancipation. "The people," the article claimed, "are fighting to redeem the historic American commitment symbolized in the American flag, the right of every man, women and child to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness."^{49}

Clearly labor saw itself at the center of the battle for the nation's soul in 1936, but also in the context of class conflicts that had been raging since the 1770s. As "Meet Union Organizer Paul Revere" put it, "the places of the Tories and of the Copperheads are taken by the labor-baiters, the anti-union slave-drivers, chiselers and exploiters." As with the Revolution and the Civil War, "the aggregate force of the United Estates is pitted against the people of the United States."^{50} The long standing differences between capital and labor remained, but with the American economy in collapse and capital threatening to take control of the nation politically as well as economically, the ACWA used the rhetoric of past wars to impress upon its members the importance of the election of 1936. Such rhetoric would prove useful in the drive to elect Franklin Roosevelt.

^{49} "People against Dollars: Three Crises in American History," 1.
^{50} "Meet Union Organizer Paul Revere," 1.
The Advance cast labor at the center of a national fight to reclaim liberty, equality and the American dream. It used several rhetorical devices to attempt to win that fight. The first was a declaration that America was not a land of freedom, but that labor could make it one. Another second was a series of allusions to the Declaration of Independence, claiming that the ideals of the founders had been betrayed and could, once again, be restored by labor. Finally, the ACWA dedicated a number of pages to directly connecting labor’s fight for and equality with leaders such as Abraham Lincoln and events such as the American Revolution. In each case, labor cast capital as a monolithic, tyrannical force that usurped the rightful power of the American people for its own selfish ends—thus, big business was most often compared to King George’s armies or southern slaveholders. As a counterpoint, labor was consistently portrayed as at the head of a new march of freedom; just as Washington’s liberating army and Lincoln’s emancipating one had freed Americans in the past, so too would labor break the chains of capital.

IV. “Labor Day belongs to all of us”: the ACWA and Franklin Roosevelt

The ACWA’s convention in Cleveland in May 1936 formally threw the support of the Amalgamated behind Franklin Roosevelt in his bid for reelection. In the wake of the announcement, The Advance, more than ever before, linked its rhetoric of Americanism to Roosevelt and his potential to lead labor’s new march to freedom. In the wake of the convention, the pages of The Advance were filled with several different rhetorical devices to win the support of ACWA members. The first was cautious praise of Roosevelt’s legislation as a good starting point toward true industrial democracy. Even more space was dedicated to praising Roosevelt as a man, a man who (like the labor movement) was a direct descendant
of Jefferson and Lincoln—a man who could carry the mantle of freedom for all Americans, especially labor. Finally, The Advance reprinted many of Roosevelt’s addresses, allowing him to speak for himself.

Despite the Amalgamated’s consistent support for Roosevelt, praise for New Deal programs is surprisingly scarce in The Advance. Much of the praise was tempered with the cautious assertion that labor would not be satisfied with the reforms already enacted. In 1935, Sidney Hillman commended the NRA as “a democratic instrumentality which aims at achieving a coordinated balance of production and consumption...” At the same time, however, he made it clear that such legislation had “the beginning of national economic planning” (my emphasis), and that “many intermediate steps” had to be taken before society had arrived at the point of true liberty and equality.\(^{51}\) Another article quoted an assertion made by Edward Keating, editor of the journal Labor. Keating was even more cautious than Hillman; he labeled the 1935 elections “emphatically a demand for a new deal, rather than an indorsement [sic] of the ‘New Deal.’”\(^{52}\)

Other articles made it abundantly clear that the ACWA was unsatisfied with Roosevelt’s program. Although no one in The Advance ever explicitly condemned the New Deal (how could they?), one editorial called the National Industrial Recovery Act “unsatisfactory in points of labor representation, machinery of enforcement, and...wage minima.” Again, however, the New Deal was still praised: the editors noted that despite its shortcomings, the NIRA “has marked a step toward industrial government.”\(^{53}\) Clearly,

\(^{51}\) Hillman, “President Hillman on the Quest for Economic Security,” 1.
\(^{52}\) “A New Deal or the New Deal?” The Advance XXI, no. 1 (Jan. 1935): 1.
\(^{53}\) “Union Industry under Codes,” The Advance XXI, no. 3 (March 1935): 2.
ACWA leaders felt ambiguous about Roosevelt’s legislation. On the one hand, it was certainly better than the repression of the post-World War I era; on the other, many labor leaders wanted to see the institution of true industrial democracy in the United States.

The ACWA clearly saw Franklin Roosevelt as the man most capable of making industrial democracy a reality. Whatever shortcomings his legislation may have possessed, *The Advance* clearly believed in Roosevelt’s personal qualifications to lead America to a new era of labor democracy. The Cleveland Convention’s official endorsement of Roosevelt was reprinted in *The Advance*, and the Convention clearly felt that labor and Roosevelt were fighting the same battle against the same enemy: the ACWA pledged its members “to throw themselves into the coming political battle with the utmost vigor, to drive back the Tory forces of this country who have organized the powers of plutocracy and privilege in an attempt to defeat you....” The rhetoric that tied the triumph of labor to the triumph of American ideals was similarly tied to Roosevelt—the reason the plutocrats were arrayed against Roosevelt was because he “dared to stand for legislation aiming to put into practice the great truths proclaimed in our Declaration of Independence....”

Obviously, the ACWA had put all of its faith into Roosevelt as the man who could best help labor in its quest to restore American democracy.

But the Convention’s official wire to Roosevelt seems positively restrained when compared with the praise that can be found in the editorial pages of *The Advance*. The October 1936 issue contained an editorial that applied the aforementioned historical allusions to Roosevelt: “Under the Roosevelt Administration labor has received, for the first time in

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54 "Convention Wires President Roosevelt of Political Decision of the Union," *The Advance* XXII. no. 6 (June 1936): 11.
all American history since Abraham Lincoln, a helping hand in the uneven contest between economic democracy and economic royalism." There is no mistaking the connection implied between Lincoln’s freeing of the slaves from the chains southern plantations and Roosevelt’s freeing of modern laborers from the chains of capitalist oppression.

The November 1936 issue printed excerpts from a John L. Lewis radio broadcast that went even further. Lewis’s address included such bold claims as, “an American, concerned with the future, will vote for the re-election of Roosevelt.” In another reprinted address, Lewis spoke of the 1936 Democratic Party platform as “economically speaking…the greatest document that has ever been uttered by a partisan political convention in the history of the Republic.” Lewis (at this point in his union career, at least) linked the reelection of Roosevelt not just to the future of American democracy as promised in the Declaration of Independence, but the future of America itself; Roosevelt was all at once a beacon of liberty, a descendant of the founders, a bulwark against capitalist oppression, a leader of labor and the only hope for the future of real democracy in the United States.

It was not just the editors who praised what they saw as Roosevelt’s courage and dedication to working people. The Reader’s Page of The Advance was filled with constant praise of the President. Perhaps most notably, and certainly most interesting, were the poems and odes written by various union members. One long poem submitted by reader Harry Levin of the Local 110 in Philadelphia, discussed specific legislation beneficial to labor:

He first declared a bank holiday,
To assure the workers they’d get their pay.

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55 "We’re in This Battle to Win It," The Advance XXII, no. 10 (Oct. 1936): 2.
The people's confidence he tried to regain;  
His future policy to them he explained.  
He brought to us the NRA,  
Giving the workers somewhat of a say.  
In making laws that he writ,  
Mainly, for our benefit.  
Is there any wonder that we adore,  
Franklin D. Roosevelt for evermore.\(^{58}\)

Clearly, workers were learning a great deal from the discussions of "What's Going on in Washington" contained in *The Advance*, and, like their union, had thrown their support behind Roosevelt. Another poem, by reader Anthony Carmagnola of the Local 4 in New York City depicts Roosevelt's charisma and shows how workers engaged in Americanist rhetoric just as labor publications did. One stanza reads:

Faced with problems unparalleled in the annals of our nation,  
Remarkably you met the task of recovery with determination.  
America is mighty proud of you, great history-making President.  
Noblest leader, with a magnetic personality, always confident.  
Knowing by heart the true spirit of the American people today,  
Leading them forward to a greater future in the real American Way,  
Instilling solemnly in every patriotic home and institution,  
New Deal Ideals conceived by the framers of the Constitution!\(^{59}\)

Even readers of *The Advance* were now making historical allusions. Clearly, it was not only the editorial staff of *The Advance* that saw Roosevelt as the inheritor of the mantle of liberty—the man who could make the dream of industrial democracy a reality; readers took such views to heart. Their submissions also show a sophisticated understanding of nationalist rhetoric and the place of the New Deal in the context of American history.

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In many cases, however, the ACWA simply allowed Roosevelt to speak for himself. Reprints of his public addresses and letters to the Amalgamated were common. They demonstrated Roosevelt’s dedication to labor, as well as an intersection of rhetoric. In a letter to George L. Berry, president of Labor’s Non-Partisan League, Roosevelt stated that he and labor possessed “a common heritage of principle,” which was “to preserve human freedom… and to prevent forever a return to that despotism which comes from unlicensed power to control and manipulated the resources of our Nation and the destiny of human lives.” The ACWA had anointed Roosevelt the head of a resurgent labor movement, and it was clearly a role Roosevelt took seriously.

More interesting, however, are the ways in which the historical rhetoric used in The Advance was so often reflected in the speeches of Roosevelt. It would be fascinating for a historian with more time and resources than myself to probe the relationship between the rhetoric of the two sides—was it causal (if so, which side used it first?) or merely correlational? At any rate, Roosevelt, like ACWA leaders, often cast his rhetoric in historical terms. On the eve of Labor Day 1936, Roosevelt gave a radio address that was excerpted on the front page of The Advance. Roosevelt argued that “the Fourth of July commemorates our political freedom—a freedom without which economic freedom is meaningless indeed. Labor Day symbolizes our determination to achieve an economic freedom for the average man which will give his political freedom reality.”

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60 “Greetings from President Roosevelt.” The Advance XXII, no. 9 (Sept. 1936): 17.
Roosevelt went further: “tomorrow, Labor Day, belongs to all of us. Tomorrow, Labor Day, symbolizes the hope of all Americans.” It is bold indeed for a U.S. President to imply that Labor Day is more important than Independence Day, but Roosevelt clearly agreed with the ACWA that a resurgence of labor must occur to preserve democracy; his claim that “Labor Day belongs to all of us” says less about the number of working people in America than it does about the importance of organized labor in FDR’s vision of America.

Like the ACWA, Roosevelt cast opponents of organized labor as going against the grain of American history, claiming that they “fail to read both the signs of the times and American history” by attempting to “refuse the worker any effective power to bargain collectively, to earn a decent livelihood and to acquire security.” Obviously, Roosevelt was not just allied with labor; he was allied against the forces of capital and oppression that labor was fighting so aggressively.

Clearly, the ACWA’s support of Roosevelt was unconditional. Despite some of the union’s misgivings about the alleged conservatism of some New Deal programs, they consistently portrayed Roosevelt as leading labor into a new era of democracy and freedom. By praising Roosevelt’s programs (albeit somewhat ambivalently), as well as Roosevelt personally (both in editorials and through reader submissions) and reprinting Roosevelt’s own words, the ACWA linked its own rhetoric of Americanism to FDR’s candidacy and gave him stronger appeal to readers of The Advance.

62 Ibid.
63 Ibid.
V. "A mighty labor voice": The Significance of the 1936 Election to Labor

"Since the days of the National Industrial Recovery Act and Section 7a there has been a growing interest on the part of labor in the importance of labor legislation." So wrote ACWA Assistant General President Jacob Potosky in May 1936. Indeed, there can be no denying that labor's involvement in the election of 1936 was greater than in any previous election. The Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America, through their official journal, The Advance, threw their support behind President Franklin Roosevelt using several different rhetorical techniques. Ultimately, the combined effect of these techniques granted to the election a near-millennial significance for American labor.

The first device used in The Advance was the importance of labor to American life. ACWA leaders repeatedly stressed the vitality of labor to a strong democracy, and that rhetoric was later applied to the election. The editors of The Advance assured their readers that by standing together, labor could overcome any force. "If a mighty labor voice floods the polls," one article claimed in late 1936, "if labor's voice roars YES to the promises and the implied meaning of the New Deal," the result would be "new labor bills...New regulation of business...We ask for justice, for humanity, for fair dealing, for the welfare of all." The most important part of the article is one sentence: "The key to the outcome is in labor's hands." Without a strong, unified showing by labor at the polls, Roosevelt would be defeated—and labor would surely follow. By placing labor at the center of the outcome of the election, ACWA leaders both increased the solidarity of the union (by assuring members of its strength), and added an intensity to the campaign.

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Another type of rhetoric common to the ACWA was denunciation of capitalists and other reactionaries. By the time of the election, such rhetoric dominated The Advance; the editors were no longer showing workers the bright future promised by Roosevelt; they were depicting the repressive one that would result from a Landon victory. "In this contest between the nation of working and unemployed people, and the holdover class of men who have been stubbornly refusing to see the changes occurring in the very heart of American life," the Editorial Page claimed in 1936, and between Roosevelt and Landon—"one representing the nation and the other the class"—organized workers had "practically no choice." Readers of The Advance did not have to guess at who represented the "holdover class." It was the American Liberty League, the National Association of Manufacturers, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, the Supreme Court and any other opponents of labor.

Interestingly, however, Alf Landon was rarely attacked personally; this is most likely because although Landon was no liberal, it would have been difficult to portray him as a "plutocrat." The condemnations of reactionary forces within the pages of The Advance ultimately served as a dark counterpoint to the bright future offered by Franklin Roosevelt’s reelection.

The American dream as an unfulfilled promise, the betrayal of historic American ideals by the greed of capital—these too were common themes in The Advance. As the election loomed, the editors of the journal made it increasingly clear that such ideals could be restored through the reelection of Roosevelt. "Of course, the primary union task is to secure ever greater improvements in working conditions and in living standards for workers," Jacob

Potofsky noted in 1936. "It has, however, become necessary, under the changing economic conditions of American life," he continued, "that the use of economic power be supplemented with...political power." Clearly, Potofsky claimed, labor's agitation for higher wages and better conditions was no longer enough. Such a claim fits perfectly with the constant claims in The Advance that American democracy was under attack. If labor agitated only at the picket line and not at the polls, their gains would be for naught.

Historical allusions were also increasingly used as the election grew closer. In July 1936, one article placed two sets of quotes side-by-side. One was entitled "Jefferson on the Constitution." the other "Roosevelt on Jefferson." The implication was clear: Roosevelt was a direct descendant of Jefferson, an inheritor of the mantle of the Constitution. Through the use of allusions that compared Roosevelt to the founders, workers gained the sense that they were participating in more than an election; November 1936 represented a watershed event in American history. These allusions, combined with the claims that the American dream could be restored by labor's work at the ballot box, combined to make the election of 1936 incredibly important to readers of The Advance.

The final rhetorical technique used by the editors of The Advance was its depiction of Roosevelt and his policies. The ACWA was not squeamish about laying out "Labor Demands on the NRA," which included equal rights for labor on code authorities, establishment of minimum wages, extending codes over all industry, provisions for enforcement and improvement of codes and an end to child labor. Such "demands" are a

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67 Potofsky, "Great Work before This Generation." 20.
68 "Build Your America, Youth of the Union." 1.
perfect example of labor's ambivalent attitude toward New Deal reforms—certainly they helped labor, but were they enough? As we have seen, however, no such ambivalence existed on the part of labor regarding Roosevelt's character and the importance of his victory in 1936. "In this election," one editorial proclaimed, "Mr. Roosevelt stands on the side of progress; the combined reactionary forces speak through Mr. Landon." Clearly, labor was committed to Roosevelt as the man who could bring industrial democracy to America. His defeat, however, would bring about a new era of capitalist dominance.

The election of 1936 is, indisputably, one of the most important in the history of the United States. What is somewhat surprising, however, is the fact that the editors of The Advance were cognizant of that fact at the time. Through various rhetorical techniques centered on concepts of Americanism and democracy, the ACWA was able to lend the election an intense significance for its members and, arguably, contributed to the massive labor showing at the polls that helped FDR win reelection by a huge landslide. Perhaps the attitude and eventual success of The Advance in 1935 and 1936 was best expressed by one of its readers, amateur poet Harry Levin:

Awake all you citizens, awake with a roar,
Franklin D. Roosevelt for evermore!  

70 "We're in This Battle to Win It," 2.
71 "Reader's Page," 27.
Part Two: *American Federationist* and the Struggle for Industrial Democracy

At first glance, the official journal of the American Federation of Labor, *American Federationist*, seems to bear no similarity whatsoever to *The Advance*. Indeed, where *The Advance* is a newspaper, *American Federationist* is a journal in every sense of the word: where the former was filled with cartoons, the latter is filled with dense blocks of text with titles like "Expansion and Indebtedness." But this is not to say that the AFL's journal was apolitical. Quite the opposite, as a matter of fact: the arguments of the 1935 and 1936 issues of *American Federationist* (most of them articulated by AFL president William Green in the editorial pages) contain a sophisticated and complex critique of the problems of American society—as well as solutions to those problems.

Each group in the triumvirate of labor, business and government had its own agenda for ending the Great Depression and ensuring that another would never occur. For the AFL, the solution to depressions was industrial democracy, that ever-elusive partnership of labor, government and business. Whereas the editorials of *The Advance* often seemed to neglect that business was indeed an essential part of that triad, *American Federationist* constantly spelled out its definition of industrial democracy, and why such a form of government was essential to the survival of labor, and of America itself.

But industrial democracy was, in the eyes of Green and his counterparts, not being achieved. The AFL saw a number of injustices in American society. *American Federationist* made numerous critiques of American industry in particular, bemoaning the lack of regulation and the unchecked rapacity of business interests and the inequities that resulted. But the AFL also made it clear that it was not in the revolution business,
that it was not challenging the rights of private property and the profit motive.

William Green and his associates, like the editors of *The Advance*, further saw the Supreme Court’s striking down of the National Industrial Recovery Act as a huge setback for labor. To its criticisms of industry, *American Federationist* added stinging rebukes of the Supreme Court and its power. So Green and other contributors to the AFL journal made clear their commitment to industrial democracy and their assertion that it was not yet a reality.

However, Green and others made it consistently clear that though industrial democracy was not yet real, democracy itself was live and well. Despite their displeasure with American society, *American Federationist* consistently extolled the virtues of Americanism and American society, and worked diligently to place labor within that paradigm. Again, the AFL was not seeking a revolution; it was merely seeking to improve labor’s station within American society.

How to solve this disconnect between the AFL’s displeasure with the progress of industrial democracy and its obvious and oft-stated love of American ideals and traditions? Obviously, one needed a strong and cooperative federal government, and the Roosevelt administration certainly fit the bill. New Deal legislation was constantly praised as a stepping stone toward industrial democracy, and FDR and his government were viewed as a vital partner in the construction of a new society. While not portrayed in the same messianic terms employed by the editors of *The Advance*, Green and his compatriots were clearly appreciative of FDR’s friendship with labor, and his candidacy for reelection in 1936 was strongly endorsed by *American Federationist* as critical to
I. "The future is clear": The AFL and Industrial Democracy

To understand the appeals of American Federationist, the AFL's understanding of industrial democracy must be made clear. It is obvious that after the organization of workers, industrial democracy is the most important part of the AFL's agenda; references to it are scattered throughout the 1935 and 1936 issues of the journal. American Federationist asserted that the AFL was seeking a system of democracy composed of a harmonious cooperation of industrial officials, labor leaders, and the federal government. But AFL officials made it clear that, unlike some of their more radical counterparts, they truly were seeking to cooperate with business, not reduce or eliminate its power. Indeed, some of the arguments contained in the AFL journal's pages seem positively reserved. Whatever the arguments, there is no denying that industrial democracy represented the centerpiece of the AFL's political program.

How was industrial democracy defined in the pages of American Federationist? It was never directly defined; rather, Green chose to use counterexamples to show what industrial democracy was not. Basically, any society with an underrepresented labor movement and large-scale social inequalities was not an industrial democracy. In American society, industrial democracy had not yet been achieved. In several articles, a "crossroads" metaphor was applied. "We can choose from these patterns," one editorial argued, "dictatorship with governmental edicts deliberately advancing the interests of
labor or investors: or self-government through balances representation for functional
groups under supervision of an agent representing national well-being."

American Federationist was sure to make clear that industrial democracy required
the full participation of all three groups. Labor, of course, was at the center of their
struggle. "Labor is continuing its fight for the principles of freedom and democracy in
this new field of [industrial] government," Green noted at one point, "upon the fortunes
of our fight depends the very existence of capitalism and private ownership as it exists
today." When contained in The Advance, grandiose statements that like these
convinced workers of their importance in electoral and organizing drives. Since
American Federationist was directed more toward union leadership than toward rank-
and-file members, the language could be toned down somewhat—although, as seen here,
labor was always at the rhetorical center of arguments regarding democracy.

The AFL also stressed the importance of cooperating with government. Without
the regulatory powers of the government, no democracy, let alone one requiring as much
planning as an industrial democracy, could survive. American Federationist was quick to
note the importance of the government's role, even giving it a great deal of credit by
characterizing the New Deal as a process whereby "the United States undertook to
develop industrial government under Federal supervision." Like labor, government had
been "inspired by a vision of a civilization that could provide plenty for all instead of
want and degradation for the masses." But unlike labor, government had regulatory

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73 Ibid.
powers that could be used to stabilize the economy and secure an equal partnership between labor and capital. "The future is clear," claimed one editorial. "Our industrial civilization requires planning and direction. Either the functional groups concerned will assume these responsibilities under government chairmanship...or the government must assume control." 75

Even employers were given their due—an act unthinkable within the polemical pages of The Advance. Capitalists were not embraced as brothers, of course, but it was made clear that industry must cooperate to make industrial government a success. When defining the process in an editorial in an article entitled "Industrial Government," Green made note that "in developing [industrial government]...it is important that the government which represents all groups shall be the coordinating agency and employers and employees shall participate equally." 76 In other words, government could pass regulations and coordinate production, but it was employer-employee cooperation that would truly make the system a success.

To achieve its goals against capital, however, labor needed a more concerted effort. In an article entitled "Two Handed Fighting," E.R. Bowen, General Secretary of the Cooperative League, repeated the story that that "an English labor leader recently declared that American Labor was fighting with one hand behind its back" by not supporting more cooperatives. 77 For industrial democracy to succeed, labor had to try harder to make it a reality.

The AFL obviously felt that industrial democracy was vital to the survival of labor. Doomsday rhetoric predicting the failure of basic American institutions—including the labor movement itself—accompanied discussions of the future of industrial democracy. One article discussing the dangers of "revolutionary" groups like the CIO asserted that "the best protection our free government can have against revolutionary movements is the development of equal opportunities for justice for all groups."\(^78\) In an even bolder statement, Green claimed that the building of an "industrial constitution" was "an undertaking whose implications and consequences are comparable only with the work the Fathers did in drafting the Constitution of the United States."\(^79\)

It is clear that the AFL viewed industrial democracy as critical to the success of the labor movement and the future of the nation. *American Federationist* shows that the AFL saw industrial democracy as an equal partnership between labor, business and government. The full cooperation of all three groups was necessary for any sort of success to occur. But such cooperation had not yet taken place; industrial democracy could solve the problems of the Depression, but first business had to control its own craving for profits at the expense of others. Regardless of criticisms it lodged against capital, however, the AFL obviously saw industrial democracy as a key component of a new, prosperous America.

II. "Two philosophies in active conflict": Criticisms of Capital

Like almost all unions and labor federations, the AFL took the offensive in the 1930s, taking the Great Depression as an example of the results of an unregulated and

\(^{78}\) Green. "Decision." 12

unplanned economy. The greed of American business was clearly holding back the progress of industrial democracy. *American Federationist* is full of criticisms of the rampant greed of industry, of the influence of the wealthy in the government, of the appalling effects of laissez-faire capitalism; business was not doing its part to help make industrial democracy a reality. However, *American Federationist* was sure to temper its critiques, assuring its readers that industrial democracy did not challenge basic rights of private property and profit.

Clearly, there was no love lost between the AFL and industrial capitalists. The pages of *American Federationist* constantly attacked the greed of business owners as a cause of the Great Depression and a stumbling block in the way of industrial democracy. At one point, Green acknowledged that “depression has always followed prosperity as inevitably night follows day,” but added that “depression as well as prosperity has always provided occasion for the favored few to add heavily to their bank accounts.”^80^ Another article noted the “struggle going on in our Nation between those who have been able to take advantage of existing conditions to secure a comfortable life for themselves…and those who would set up minimal social standards for those employed by the more successful.”^81^

Business was obviously impeding the progress of industrial democracy by taking more than its fair share. Once again the “crossroads” metaphor was employed to describe the centrality of labor to the growth of industrial democracy: “Shall we move toward recovery with a large standing army of unemployed, wealth for the few and privations for

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the many, or shall we set ourselves to the problem of producing plenty for all with opportunity for each?” asked one article. The answer was clear; “if this country chooses the second way, it needs a strong organized labor movement.” Some of the language used made the relationship between labor and business even more dichotomous. One editorial claimed that “in every relationship of life,” there existed “two philosophies in active conflict...those who want to establish control over others and those who want to provide opportunity for all to develop the capacity for making their own decisions.” It is self-evident that in the AFL’s eyes, labor was the latter group.

But for all its criticisms of capitalism, American Federationist made it abundantly clear that the AFL was not seeking a revolution. “Labor seeks rights through orderly government channels” asserted Green in one editorial. But there are few who would accuse the AFL of being a band of radicals. More significant were the numerous reassurances within the pages of American Federationist that signal the AFL’s commitment to preservation of American ideals, such as private property. In an article on old age pensions, one author clarified the definition of industrial democracy, no doubt making it more palatable to conservatives:

Democratic government should concern itself, not with providing special privileges for the few, but with guaranteeing minimum safety and comfort for all. As long as private industry exists, those who want more than the minimum can still use the methods of private industry which they have used in the past.

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82 Green, "In the Union's Service," American Federationist 43, no. 4 (April 1936): 354.
84 Green, "Shall Labor Have Rights?" American Federationist 43, no. 7 (July 1936): 682.
In the AFL's vision of industrial democracy, business would still be free to engage in free competition and make a profit.

If there was any doubt about these sentiments, they were clarified in other articles. In his editorial discussing the creation of an "industrial constitution," Green assured businessmen that such a document would not challenge "the employers' right to function collectively through trade associations." In this case, Green's use of language like "employers' right" and "function collectively" comes dangerously close to equating trade associations with unions—again, a practice that would have been unthinkable to the editors of *The Advance*. In another article entitled "Co-Partnership of Labor and Industry," the author proposes that labor should "receive a fair share of the profits of industry," but also concedes that "Capital is entitled to a reasonable, but low, return on its investment." Again, the statement seems perfectly reasonable, but it unimaginable that any editor of *The Advance* would be so conservative in his or her proposals.

The editors of *American Federationist* obviously felt that the lack of industrial democracy in America was partly attributable to the failures of capital. Like other labor organizations, the AFL faulted the greed of capitalists for the Great Depression. Unlike many other organizations, however, AFL also resolved to dedicate itself to peaceful industrial cooperation and democracy, and underlying all of the criticisms in *American Federationist* are the AFL's conservative reassurances that industrial democracy would not threaten private property or the traditional rights of business.

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III. "Adverse decisions": Criticism of the Supreme Court & the Schechter Decision

The AFL, like other labor organizations (not to mention millions of Americans) was aghast at the Supreme Court's decision to strike down the National Industrial Recovery Act in Schechter v. United States (1935). American Federationist responded by discussing the decision in some of the same apocalyptic terms as The Advance. The AFL portrayed Supreme Court justices as out of step with the needs and sentiments of modern America. American Federationist also employed a small dose of familiar historical rhetoric. But in its assertions of how labor and government should respond, the AFL remained steadfast in its commitment to industrial democracy, urging both organized labor and the federal government to respond to the Court's decision.

Much like the editors of The Advance, William Green and his compatriots at American Federationist cast the justices of the Supreme Court as old-fashioned, out of touch with modern reality and in the pocket of business interests. "The Supreme Court has told us that our Constitution is not flexible enough to permit us to have the laws we need today," he stated. The Court "made the issue very clear: vested interests can be protected but human rights cannot have equal protection nor can new needs be met." In another editorial, he claimed that the Court declared that "the power of the Federal Government is so limited that we as a Nation cannot have the laws we want and need." Another article went even farther, claiming that the Supreme Court's decision would lead to anarchy:

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89 Green, "Judicial Review," American Federationist 42, no. 7 (July 1935): 691.
Those in high places who resist the government employ lawyers to petition the Judiciary to review the law passed by the Legislature in order to have it declared unconstitutional. Thus have been sowed the seeds of the most powerful influences for lawlessness—opportunity to challenge legality of law; uncertainty as to the meaning of law and the need for obeying it; superiority to law of those able to employ astute constitutional lawyers able to find judicial precedents in conflict with legislative or congressional decisions.  

Certainly these sorts of criticisms were nothing new; The Advance had used even harsher language to describe the Court’s decision.

Another familiar sight was the presence of historical and constitutional allusions in the AFL’s criticism of the Court. Much of the criticism of the Schechter decision centered on the apparent arrogance of the Court’s justices; the interpretation of the Constitution was out of step with labor’s interpretation—and to unions, labor was the inheritor of the Constitution. “There are those who contend that the Fathers of the Constitution intended the Judiciary should review the work of the Legislative Body,” Green argued in early 1936. “Whatever the Fathers had in mind,” he went on, “the Judiciary has established itself as the final legislative authority, nullifying such laws as do not conform to the personal philosophy of the majority of the Supreme Court and modifying the intent of others by judicial interpretation and application.”

The idea that the Court was overstepping its bounds in its interpretation of the Constitution is one that would have been familiar to readers of The Advance, and it was used consistently in American Federationist. Some of the rhetoric grew incredibly heated: Green claimed that “our Constitution has been a weapon of established interests

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upon which law after law has been impaled." But most of the language was relatively
civil, and centered on the AFL's own interpretation of judicial review. "While the
Constitution vests certain powers in a Supreme Court and such inferior courts as
Congress may establish." Green asserted, "nowhere is the right to overrule the work of
Congress delegated to them."

The other notable use of language is in the AFL's historical allusions. Though
not nearly as prominent as those used in The Advance, William Green also made some
judicious use of historical reference to drive his point home. In mid-1935, he claimed
that "the decision of the Court [in Schechter]... is the greatest obstacle to orderly progress
that has befallen our nation since the Dred Scott decision." Such bombastic rhetoric
reflected the very real anger of the AFL over the Supreme Court's decision in Schechter
and its apparent overstepping of its constitutional bounds.

The response of American Federationist to Schechter was intense. "No
compromise measures will help our dilemma," Green argued. "We must make it possible
for a free nation to speak for all the people unhindered by the state's sovereignty or
judicial review." The response was a two-pronged attack calling on two of the
participants in industrial democracy: organized labor and government. The union’s first
goal was organization to facilitate political strength. "We must move forward with union
organization," Green announced, "so as to be ready to deal with the political and

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92 Green, "Is It Stalemate?" 685.
93 Green, "Judicial Review," 693.
95 Green, "Judicial Review," 693.
legislative situations that will arise upon adverse decisions of the Supreme Court. A strong union movement would be in a better position to negotiate with business and government, regardless of "adverse decisions" made by the Court.

The other goal was for the legislature (which, being elected and not appointed, was the "true" representative of democracy) to step in and curb the power of the judiciary to assure that laws commensurate with public sentiment were not struck down. "Either the arbitrary power of the Judiciary has to be curbed," Green stated, "or the expressed or implied power of the legislative branch more clearly defined." Another author, Jennie McMullin Turner, thought that Congress was being far too timid in its actions: "Instead of protecting the Supreme Court from popular wrath by refraining from passing needed legislation because the Court may throw out that legislation as unconstitutional, Congress should go ahead with constructive legislation." Regardless of their feelings about Congress' muscle or lack thereof, the sentiments were all similar: the Supreme Court, with decisions like Schecter, was standing in the way of democracy. "If we are to establish a democratic government...we must give Congress power to legislate the rules of our common life," Green argued. "Judicial review has enabled courts to restrict and defeat the will of the people and has built up judicial dictatorship."

The AFL was clearly dismayed by the Supreme Court's Schecter decision, and it responded by skewering the Court in several ways. American Federationist painted the Court as a group of conservative old men who were out of touch with the true sentiments

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97 Green, "Is It Stalemate?" 686.
of the American people. Green and his fellow leaders also employed apocalyptic rhetoric and used a bit of historical allusion to impress upon AFL members the importance of the Court's decision. Eventually, Green asked for unions and the government to cooperate in resisting the process of judicial review. It is this last point which is key: in the eyes of the AFL, the Schechter decision was a blow to industrial democracy, so the only proper response was one of cooperation between labor and government.

IV. "The good old U.S.A.": Americanist rhetoric in American Federationist

It is clear that the AFL was interested in adjusting America to a society based on industrial harmony and democracy. But such calls for a new society were often viewed with suspicion by conservatives and business leaders. The AFL was quick to point out that industrial democracy was not a threat to American traditions. In several different instances, writers in American Federationist made a sort of recommitment to American democracy, a show of loyalty to their country that would be familiar to readers of The Advance. Also familiar was the AFL's use of Americanist rhetoric to place labor at the center of democracy.

Despite its criticisms of American industry and its repeated calls for industrial democracy, American Federationist also commonly extolled the virtues of America as it was—thus reassuring conservatives that the AFL was seeking minor adjustments to the social order, not a complete overhaul. One article entitled "Do You Ever Stop to Think" embodied that spirit of moderation. The author noted that "here in the good old U.S. we have machinery, raw material and food resources enough to feed and clothe the world but still millions want for food and clothing that they can't get." Something was clearly
wrong with American society. But such criticisms were tempered with such aw-shucks displays of loyalty as "the good old U.S." Later in the article, the author noted that "ten per cent rules the other ninety," but was steadfast in his belief that "the good old U.S.A. is the best place to live in the world." Clearly, adjustments to the American social order had to be made, but no one in the AFL would deny that the "good old U.S.A." was the greatest nation in the world.

Other articles were more explicit in their repudiation of revolution. In an article entitled "We, the Workers" (that, obviously, was steeped in revolutionary rhetoric), author Holt Ross noted that "there is enough red in Old Glory for us," and assured readers that "the only revolution that we are presently interested in is revolutionizing the hearts of the American people to become determined to abolish poverty from American soil." Such comments take on added significance when you realize that they were written at the time when the "revolutionary" CIO was making its power play.

The AFL clearly still believed in the vitality of American democracy and the viable future of American institutions such as the Supreme Court—provided that they adjust to the evolving needs of capital-labor relations. Ross summed up the feelings of AFL leadership in "We, the Workers": "The many millions of workers in this nation have come up to the present stage of the depression with heads bloody but with their faith unshaken in our American institutions."

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101 Holt Ross, "We, the Workers," *American Federationist* 42, no. 4 (April 1935): 426.
102 Green, "Majority Rule," *American Federationist* 43, no. 9 (Sep. 1936).
103 Ross, "We, the Workers," 425.
Another rhetorical tool employed in the pages of *American Federationist* (and, once again, one that is similar to those used by the editors of *The Advance*) was the placement of organized labor at the center of a successful democracy. Whatever their criticisms of American life, AFL leadership was consistent in its claims that “we think of ourselves as citizens of the United States.”\(^{104}\) Whether they thought of themselves as citizens or workers first was irrelevant; for Green and other leaders, the two identities were inseparable. To be a good worker, one had to be a good union member; to be a good union member was to be a good citizen. In early 1936, *American Federationist* reprinted a speech by J. Warren Madden, chairman of the National Labor Relations Board, in which he called American workers “a class of men and women who are politically free and fully accustomed to the institutions of political democracy.”\(^{105}\) Workers were good citizens because they were accustomed to democracy at work.

Organized labor was also portrayed in another familiar way: as the inheritors and protectors of democratic traditions. In a two-page spread for Labor Day 1935, an article entitled “American Labor at the Crossroads” implored labor not to “take too lightly the responsibility handed down by the pioneers of organized labor. Let us carry on! It is the only true course—the American Way.” Labor’s dedication to industrial democracy, “will lead to a fuller realization of those sacred American ideals, ‘life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.’”\(^{106}\) As in *The Advance*, labor was portrayed as the most “American” of all sectors of society, the only group with a workable plan for the future of society.


American Federationist was sure to temper its critiques of American society with a recommitment to American ideals and traditions. The journal used Americanist rhetoric to assure its readers that the AFL’s plan of industrial democracy was an adjustment of society, not a revolution. Such language also helped to place labor in the center of struggles for liberty, equality and other traditionally American ideals.

V. “Executive orders”: The AFL’s endorsement of the New Deal

Clearly the AFL, through American Federationist, was committed to industrial democracy, to an adjustment of the “tyranny” of industry and the Supreme Court. At the same time, however, AFL was not seeking any sort of revolution, and had great respect for American traditions and values. How could society be adjusted without being destroyed? The answer for the AFL, as well as for countless other unions and federations, was the New Deal. In American Federationist, the New Deal was praised in two ways. For one thing, as the first substantive federal legislation protecting labor’s rights since the Sherman Antitrust Act, New Deal legislation was extolled for the legitimacy it lent to the American labor movement. Second, the New Deal was seen as a step on the path to industrial democracy. American Federationist also made note of the man responsible for the New Deal—Franklin Roosevelt—casting him as an ally in the fight toward economic harmony.

No one can deny that the New Deal was an immense boon for labor, and leaders of the AFL were quick to point out the fact that the National Industrial Recovery Act, in particular, was a “helping hand” for labor. William Green noted that “Sections 7 (a) and (b) of the National [Industrial] Recovery Act were written into law for the purpose of
imbedding Labor’s rights in the practices and customs of industry,” a significant act—labor’s rights had never before been so explicitly declared by government. Other effects discuss were more emotional than practical. One of the most commonly studied areas of the New Deal was FDR’s ability to bring hope back to a hopeless nation. One American Federationist contributor noted this as well, claiming that the NIRA “lifted the cloud of discouragement and despair which hung over workers in the United States during the long depression.”

Many of the articles praised the New Deal for finally making official statues which had long before gained legitimacy in the public mind. AFL leaders claimed that organized labor had always been recognized as a positive part of society—the difference now was that the federal government was making those rights official and pledging to protect them. Green noted that the Wagner Act of 1935 gave “legal sanction to a moral and economic right which society has long recognized.” Another article celebrating Labor Day 1935 and looking back to the achievements of that year called the nation’s biggest triumph “the crystallization of public conviction into a statutory declaration of public policy.” So while New Deal legislation such as the NIRA and the Wagner Act protected and legitimized labor, their doing so was long overdue.

But New Deal legislation was obviously not limited solely to labor. The AFL recognized the far-reaching social implications of FDR’s plan, and noted that the New Deal was a step in the right direction—toward industrial democracy. Green noted in

early 1935 that many heads of industry were attempting to evade provisions of the NIRA, and were being chastised by the government for it. "Already industries are experiencing executive orders as a consequence of their efforts to evade...the National [Industrial] Recovery Act," he reported. Such actions were exactly what AFL leadership wanted: government acting as a mediator between labor and industry. Only through such a partnership could the Depression be ended and future depressions avoided.

"We must recognize that our cherished American liberties are but a pretense so long as three-fourths of our people do not know the meaning of security," said union leader Aubrey Williams in a speech before the Council of Social Agencies. "It is along the line of a permanent correction of these inequalities that the Roosevelt New Deal has moved." The New Deal was clearly effecting the type of social change desired by industrial democracy advocates.

The intentions of the New Deal were significant as well, and they too were noted in the pages of American Federationist. "We are seeking to overcome unemployment, restore purchasing power, relieve human distress and promote social tranquility," wrote Green in a memo to President Roosevelt. These clearly were the goals of industrial democracy. The way to achieve such goals, Green asserted, was "through a complete realization, with you, of the aims and purposes of the National Industrial Recovery Act." The New Deal was an opportunity for labor to increase its stake in society while providing for industrial democracy.

It was not the New Deal alone that was endorsed by the AFL. In Franklin
democracy. Holt Ross characterized Roosevelt in a manner used continuously in *The
Advance*: "Roosevelt, the great Democrat, is fighting for the same ideals that the great
Republican, Lincoln, fought for."[^114] Just as the New Deal was seen as a panacea to
labor’s problems, Roosevelt—charismatic, calming, confident Roosevelt—was seen as a
figure around which the national labor movement should rally.

But comparisons with Abraham Lincoln were the exception, not the rule. In fact,
unlike writers in *The Advance*, AFL leaders generally did not often mention Roosevelt
personally—and when they did, he was almost never cast as a messianic figure. Rather,
Roosevelt, like the New Deal, was praised for his actions, not necessarily his personality
or character. Though aspersions were never cast upon him in *American Federationist*,
AFL leaders were apparently not interested in his charisma or his persistence; they saw in
FDR an ally in the push for industrial democracy. "President Franklin D. Roosevelt has
given heroic evidence of his determination to establish a sound national economic
policy," wrote labor leader John P. Frey in mid-1935, "which [includes] wages as a
prominent part."[^115] Frey and leaders of the AFL praised Roosevelt for his handling of the
Depression in a manner that was commensurate with their vision of industrial democracy.

AFL leaders praised the New Deal in two distinct ways. First, they were pleased
with the NIRA and Wagner Act’s legitimizing of labor’s rights, a process which the AFL
felt was long overdue. *American Federationist* also praised the New Deal as a step on

[^114]: Ross, "We, the Workers." 426.
the path toward industrial democracy; its belief in economic planning and labor-capital-
government cooperation were parallel with the desires of the AFL. Finally, Roosevelt
himself was praised, occasionally for his character, but more often as the man who would
lead America into a new age of industrial democracy.

VI. "The unmistakable mandate": The election of 1936

The end result of the rhetoric in *American Federationist* through 1935 and 1936—
the dedication to industrial democracy, the criticisms of industry, the recommitment to
American ideals, the extolling of New Deal legislation—makes the election of 1936
particularly significant to the AFL, perhaps even more so than it was to the rest of
organized labor. Not surprisingly, the election's importance was portrayed in *American
Federationist* as a struggle for the future of industrial democracy. Both before and after
the election, its significance to the development of industrial democracy was noted
numerous times.

In the months leading up to November 1936, *American Federationist*, while
rarely discussing the election in great detail, made it clear that the reelection of Roosevelt
and the election of pro-industrial democracy politicians on the state level were vitally
important. In an extended metaphor, William Green argued that America was at a
crossroads where it could either "grow up" or regress into "immaturity": "The United
States has passed that period of youth when it can content itself with believing that our
wealth of natural resources will make it unnecessary to consider their conversation or to
make provisions for the social welfare of our citizens."

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democracy. America could secure a peaceful, prosperous future; with a defeat, a regression to the old days of industrial tyranny and inefficiency would inevitably follow.

The Supreme Court’s decision in Schechter was also recalled as a reason for the importance of the 1936 election. Green noted the importance of electing candidates “pledged to the responsibility of finding how social welfare legislation can be made the law of the land unchallenged by the Judiciary. Congress must be able to legislate in the national interests.”

Recall that Green’s proposed response to Schechter was increased union organization and political mobilization. With a powerful and sympathetic legislature, even the “adverse decisions” of the Supreme Court would not be able to keep industrial democracy grounded.

The AFL also noted that while the reelection of Roosevelt would be foremost in the public mind, local and state elections were also vital to preserving the New Deal and its promises. “Presidential election years are always dominated by the campaign for the highest office in the land,” Green noted, “but important as are the nomination and election of the Chief Executive of the country, it is equally important to Labor and good citizens generally that all other elective offices be held by persons with understanding of social welfare.”

Without local and state officials to cooperate in the planning of industry, the application of codes and the enforcement of legislation, the New Deal would be all but powerless to create industrial democracy.

Green made it abundantly clear that while the articles in American Federationist were almost exclusively concerned with organization and other “bread-and-butter” issues,

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118 Ibid.: 357.
this did not make the AFL apolitical. He reiterated “Labor’s insistence upon a real measure of social security as a just return for the material contribution it makes to society’s comfort and needs,” and promised that the AFL would “mobilize its political strength behind a program designed to achieve this purpose.”

The AFL’s agenda for achieving industrial democracy clearly had an electoral component, and the federation was prepared to make that component a reality.

The importance of Roosevelt’s landslide victory in 1936 was duly noted in the pages of American Federationist, just as the election’s significance was reported in the months leading up to it. “The unmistakable mandate of the election,” Green argued in an editorial called “The Future,” “is to permanently stop the ruthless exploitation of the resources and the people of this country for the benefit of a few.” Again, Green was noting the apparent pro-labor sentiments of the American people, their “unmistakable” desire for industrial democracy.

A story about the AFL’s 1936 convention in Tampa, Florida contained a lengthy explanation of the significance of the election, which had occurred just a month before. Calling the preceding several months “one of the most extraordinary presidential campaigns in the history of the United States,” Green noted that the convention was meeting “at a time fraught with opportunity.” The AFL also took Roosevelt’s clear mandate as a clear mandate for industrial democracy: “We interpret the decision of the people to be that our government should be used to achieve social justice and security for all the people.” The idea of the government wielding its economic power for the good of

120 Green, “The Future,” 1245.
all was, of course, the basis of industrial democracy. Finally, the ties between the New
Deal and the AFL's program of industrial democracy were noted:

With such a mandate from the majority of the people President Roosevelt will
begin his second term, and in the light of this great opportunity the Tampa
Convention of the American Federation of Labor will decide its polities and
determine its legislative program.  

In the eyes of the AFL, the people had spoken, and their voices were making the same
cries as the voices of organized labor.

The election of 1936 was clearly seen as significant by AFL officials. Both
before and after the election, articles in American Federationist discussed the fact that in
many ways, November 1936 represented a national referendum on industrial democracy.
With the victory of Roosevelt nationally and various New Dealers on the state and local
levels, industrial democracy would remain a bright prospect on the horizon. Election of
Alf Landon and other "reactionaries" would create a political situation in which industrial
democracy might be untenable. In the wake of Roosevelt's triumph, American
Federationist once again noted the similarities between the New Deal and the AFL's
position on industrial democracy.

VI. Conclusion: The fight for industrial democracy

Clearly, the AFL saw industrial democracy as the solution to the problems of the
Great Depression. The cooperation of all parties—labor, industry and government—was
essential for any sort of success to occur. If such cooperation could become reality,
society would enter a new age of prosperity and industrial peace, free from the fears of a

1936): 1241.
second Great Depression. But by 1935-1936, this cooperation had not yet occurred. Through a complex series of arguments in *American Federationist*, AFL leadership managed to make clear their dedication to industrial democracy, their distaste for the greed of industry and their steadfast belief in American democratic traditions. With these arguments made, the AFL saw the New Deal as the only way to achieve industrial democracy. With this being the case, the election of 1936 took on great significance.

Like other labor organizations, the AFL criticized the greed of business leaders for having brought about the Depression, and for the fact that industrial democracy had not yet been accomplished: the greed of industry was blamed for social inequity. But *American Federationist* also criticized labor itself, nothing that a new commitment on the part of labor would be necessary to achieve industrial democracy.

The third sector of industrial democracy—government—was also criticized. Like the editors of *The Advance*, William Green and his associated criticized the Supreme Court’s decision in *Schechter v. United States* and the setback to industrial democracy it represented, labeling Supreme Court justices as overly conservative and out of touch with popular sentiment. Labor was the true inheritor of the Constitution, they argued, and so any setbacks to labor were setbacks to democracy.

But the AFL was nothing if not moderate, and *American Federationist* tempered its critiques of government and business with language that fully embraced American traditions and reiterated labor’s dedication to American democracy. It was made clear that the AFL did not seek a revolution; rather, labor, as the inheritor of the constitutional
and democratic tradition. was simply seeking to adjust the society to make it more equitable and just.

The AFL saw only one way to combine their love for traditional American democracy with their hopes for industrial cooperation and harmony: the New Deal. *American Federationist* endorsed New Deal legislation, and Franklin Roosevelt, both for the ways in which they helped to legitimize and protect the labor movement, and for the fact that both seemed to point toward a future of industrial democracy.

If the New Deal was the best (or, one might even say, the only) way to achieve industrial democracy, then the election of 1936 was a vital one indeed. Before the election, the AFL repeatedly expressed their feelings that the election was vitally important to the future of industrial democracy. In the wake of Roosevelt’s landslide victory, *American Federationist* was filled with articles about labor’s new “political plan.” Though true industrial democracy never came to fruition, the election of 1936 represented a key opportunity for the AFL to further its political agenda—and a tremendous example of labor’s changing rhetoric.
Conclusion

The significance of the election of 1936—a plebiscite on the New Deal, government-labor alliances, even Franklin Roosevelt himself—was not lost on those who tried to mobilize support for the Democrats. For the ACWA and its publication, The Advance. 1936 represented an opportunity to remake American society. With Franklin Roosevelt at the head of a new labor-based society, America would never again have to fear depressions or industrial strife. Though America had lost its way and failed to live up to the ideals established by the Founding Fathers, Roosevelt could restore such ideals and banish the reactionary forces that threatened to take over America.

For William Green and the AFL, the election of 1936 also represented an opportunity. But Green never subscribed to Roosevelt’s cult of personality in the way that the editors of The Advance did. Rather, Green kept himself grounded by pursuing and promoting a specific legislative agenda whose ultimate goal was the establishment of industrial democracy. As a result, Green looked more to the future than to the past, and so his editorials in American Federationist did not utilize nearly as many historical references as the editors of The Advance.

It is clear that despite the differences in rhetoric, both the ACWA and AFL understood the significance of the election of 1936. The New Deal was a paradigm shift in American government, and were Roosevelt to be defeated, so too would his extensive and ambitious agenda—much of it favorable to labor. Though leaders of the ACWA wanted a complete overhaul of American society and William Green wanted minor adjustments to the capital-labor relationship, both understood that any success for labor
was contingent on the reelection of Roosevelt. Divergent goals did not necessarily mean
divergent rhetoric; through they used it in different ways, the editors of both publications
relied heavily on Americanist rhetoric to achieve the goals of extolling labor, criticizing
capital and promoting Franklin Roosevelt’s run for reelection. Their triumph showed
that, for a moment at least, labor truly could lay claim to the mantle of Americanism.
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