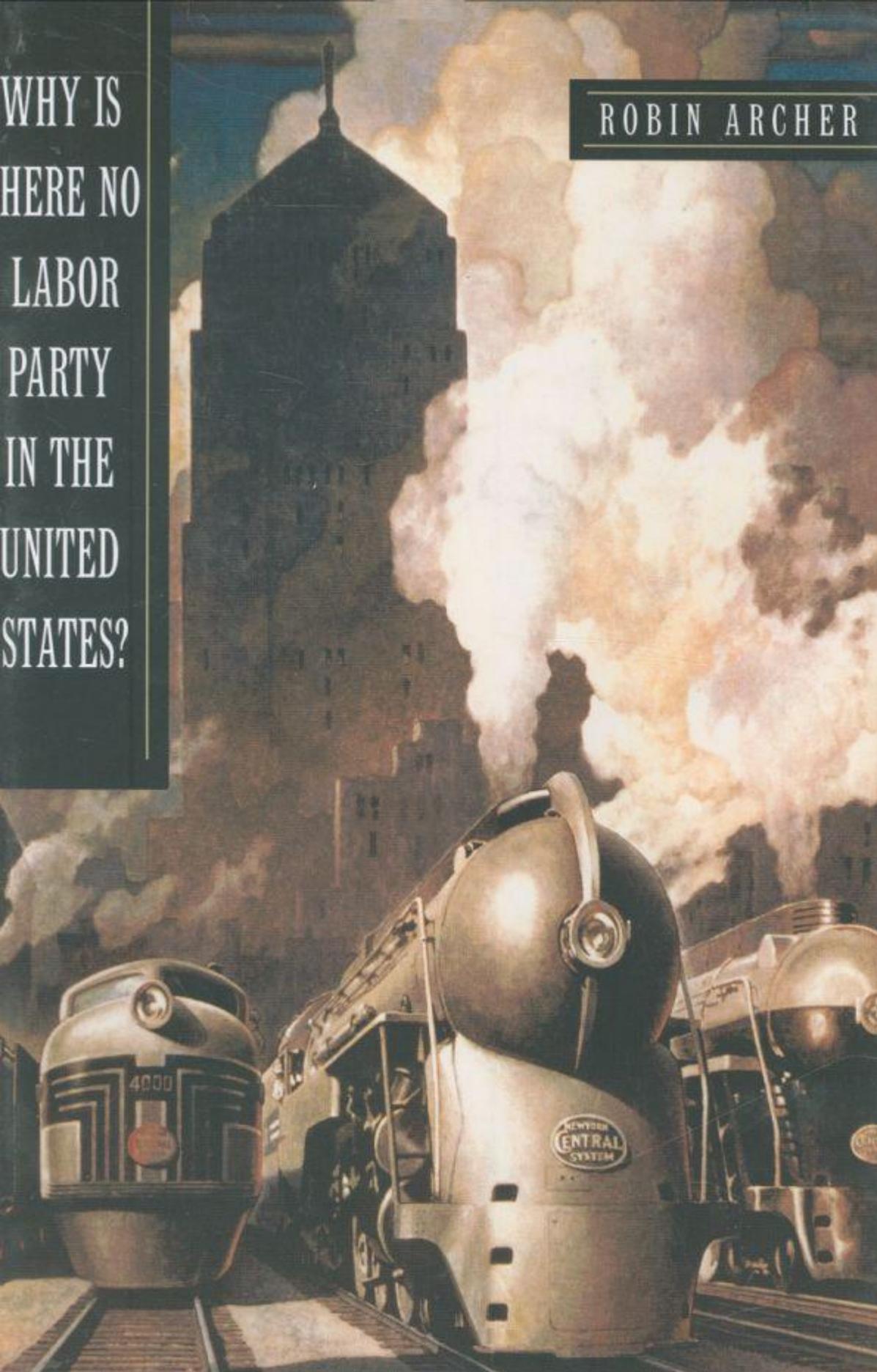


WHY IS
THERE NO
LABOR
PARTY
IN THE
UNITED
STATES?

ROBIN ARCHER



Why Is There No Labor Party in the United States?

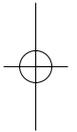
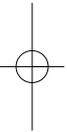


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Why Is There No Labor Party in the United States?

Robin Archer

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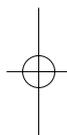
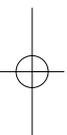
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To my Pa

Richard Douglas Archer



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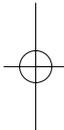
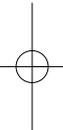
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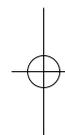
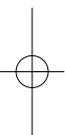
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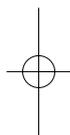
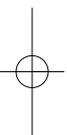
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List of Abbreviations

AFL	American Federation of Labor
AF	<i>American Federationist</i>
APA	American Protective Association
ARU	American Railway Union
ASL	Australian Socialist League
ASU	Amalgamated Shearers' Union of Australasia
AWU	Australian Workers' Union
AW	<i>Australian Workman</i>
CIO	Congress of Industrial Organizations
CN	<i>Coming Nation</i>
CSJ	<i>Coast Seamen's Journal</i>
CT	<i>Chicago Times</i>
FOTLU	Federation of Organized Trades and Labor Unions
ICTUC	Intercolonial Trades Union Congress (from 1889: Intercolonial Trades and Labor Union Congress)
IWA	International Workingmen's Association
LEL	Labor Electoral League
LFM	<i>Locomotive Firemen's Magazine</i>
ML	Mitchell Library, Sydney
MP	Member of Parliament
NLT	<i>National Labor Tribune</i>
NSW	New South Wales
NYT	<i>New York Times</i>
QSU	Queensland Shearers' Union
QLU	Queensland Labourers' Union
RT	<i>Railway Times</i>
SLP	Socialist Labor Party
SMH	<i>Sydney Morning Herald</i>
THC	Trades Hall Council
TLA	<i>Trades and Labour Advocate</i>
TLC	Trades and Labour Council
ULP	United Labor Party
UMW	United Mine Workers of America
UMWJ	<i>United Mine Workers' Journal</i>



Acknowledgments

COMPARATIVE HISTORICAL ANALYSIS requires scholars to immerse themselves in a vast array of primary and secondary sources about the politics, society, and culture of different countries or cases. This process of gathering evidence and testing arguments is, in some ways, quite a solitary task. Yet it is dependent, of course, on the earlier efforts of numerous scholars, and it would scarcely be possible without the help of a great many institutions and people.

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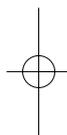
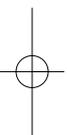
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Introduction

LABOR-BASED POLITICAL PARTIES have been an important electoral force in every advanced capitalist country. Every one, that is, except the United States. Elsewhere, these parties were established in the late nineteenth or early twentieth centuries, and, ever since then, there has been a great debate about why the American experience was different.

The late nineteenth century was also a critical period in the United States. Indeed, in the early 1890s, amid a wave of social and political unrest, the American union movement came close to establishing a labor party. At its annual convention in 1894, the American Federation of Labor debated a "Political Programme" that sought to commit the unions to independent political action. The Programme had been referred back to the Federation's affiliates by the previous year's convention, and many delegates were mandated to vote in favor of it. In fact, some unionists had already begun to build party organizations in a number of key cities and states. But AFL President Samuel Gompers and his allies were strongly opposed to the Programme, and with the help of some procedural machinations, they prevailed on the Federation to reject any foray into party politics. However, it was more than just procedural machinations that produced this result. For just one year later, delegates voted overwhelmingly for a resolution that declared that "party politics whether democratic, republican, socialistic, prohibition, or any other, should have no place in the convention of the A.F. of L."¹ Moreover, subsequent conventions repeatedly confirmed the AFL's opposition to any form of partisan political action (whether through the establishment of a labor party or through involvement in one of the existing parties). In spite of the efforts of a substantial minority of unionists, the rejection of labor party politics became firmly entrenched.

The failure to establish a labor party had fundamental and wide-ranging consequences, not only for the political development of the United States, but also for its subsequent social and economic development. If a labor party had been established, it is highly likely that business interests would have had less influence over public policy, that income and wealth would have been more equally distributed, that trade unions would have been stronger, and that a more comprehensive welfare state would have developed. This last point can be made with particular confidence. After more than two decades of comparative research, it is now widely accepted that there is an important causal link between the influence wielded by labor-based parties, and the extent, type, and timing of

2 • Introduction

welfare state development. Indeed, this “working-class power resources” or “social democratic” model of welfare state development has become a kind of orthodoxy. Like all orthodoxies, it has its challengers, and its supporters accept the need for various revisions and modifications. But even after all due weight has been given to a range of additional factors, there is good evidence that the political influence of organized labor is a key part of the explanation for some of the most important variations in social and economic policy.²

The failure to establish a labor party also lies at the heart of a wider debate about “American Exceptionalism,” and it provides an important vantage point from which to assess what, if anything, is distinctive about American politics and society. Some scholars now rail at the very mention of this debate, but there can be little doubt about its longstanding centrality in American intellectual life, or about its enduring influence over broader popular perceptions of the United States. Understanding what, if anything, is distinctive about American politics and society, and the nature of its institutional and ideological traditions, is, of course, a matter of great interest to Americans. But it need hardly be said that it is also of far more than local significance. Given the power the United States has to influence the rest of the world, the task of understanding the forces that shape its development is a matter of global importance.

In this book, I want to address a series of nested questions. At the center of the book is the title question about why there is no labor party in the United States. But the book also addresses both a more specific and a more general question. The more specific question concerns the decision that the American Federation of Labor took at its crucial convention in 1894, as well as the failure of various state-level initiatives at that time. The more general question concerns the longstanding effort to identify distinctive characteristics of American politics and society, and to offer an account of their origins and effects. Some of these questions will be familiar. But the approach to them will be novel, and it will, I hope, produce some unexpected answers.

The standard explanations for why there is no labor party rely on comparison with Europe. They point to various characteristics of the United States, like its high standard of living, its well-entrenched democracy, and its culture of liberal individualism. Explanations based on factors like these have become a kind of received wisdom, and they frequently appear in public commentaries, college textbooks, and scholarly debates.

But are they correct? In this book, I want to take a fresh look at these explanations. I propose to reassess them, and develop a new explanation, not by comparing the New World with the Old, but rather by pursuing a “most similar” comparison of one New World country with another. In particular, I propose to compare the United States with Australia. Many of the conventional explanations look much weaker when the United States is compared with Australia. For Australia had most of the same New World characteristics as

the United States, and yet it produced one of the earliest and most electorally powerful labor parties in the world.

Comparison with Australia is especially appealing because Australian unions established their party in the early 1890s, just when American unions came closest to establishing a party of their own. In each case, discussions about the establishment of a labor party took place against a similar backdrop of events. In the early 1890s, both countries suffered from the worst depression of the nineteenth century, and a series of major industrial confrontations took place in which governments sided with employers and left the unions completely defeated. But in each case, the response of the union movement was different. After some initial vacillation, the American Federation of Labor rejected any form of party political involvement, and opted to remain committed to “pure-and-simple” unionism. The Australian unions, on the other hand, put aside their longstanding apolitical traditions and decided to launch a party.

In order to clear the way for the systematic comparison that I envisage, I will begin by addressing a number of preliminary issues. First, I will clarify what I mean by a “labor-based party.” Second, I will outline the comparative explanatory strategy I propose to pursue. Third, I will consider a number of possible objections to my approach. Fourth, I will provide a brief account of the history of the labor movement in the United States and Australia in the late nineteenth century. Fifth, I will consider whether unionists in these countries were aware of each other’s activities. And finally, I will offer a short guide to the topics discussed in the chapters that follow.

LABOR-BASED PARTIES

The question about why there is no labor-based party in the United States needs to be distinguished from a number of related questions with which it is often confused. These include, most famously, the question about why there is no socialist party in the United States. But they also include questions about why there was not a more class-conscious labor movement, and why there was not a revolutionary labor-based party. In the extensive literature on these questions, the distinctions between them have often become blurred. I will frequently draw on the insights and causal hypotheses that emerge from this literature, but my focus will remain on the question about why there is no labor-based party. After all, it is only in this respect that the experience of the United States is distinctive. There were other advanced capitalist countries that did not establish a socialist party, or that did not have a very class-conscious labor movement, and there were many countries without significant revolutionary parties.

The labor-based parties that emerged in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries took different forms in different countries. Some were social

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democratic parties (like in Germany), some were socialist parties (like in France), and some were labor parties (like in Britain). But all of these parties saw themselves, and were seen by others, as members of a common political family. Indeed, they established an international organization—the Second International—that formalized and institutionalized this family relationship. And ever since they emerged, they have been regularly treated this way in numerous academic studies, newspaper commentaries, and public debates. What all these parties had in common was the uniquely privileged position they attributed to workers. Parties can be defined and categorized in terms of their ideology and identity, their organizational structures, and the social groups they represent. Labor-based parties attributed a uniquely privileged position to workers in all three of these respects, and it was this combination of characteristics that set them apart. In some cases, this privileged position was an informal and de facto one. More often, it was codified and formally entrenched.

The ideological pronouncements of labor-based parties made the pursuit of workers' interests the central focus of their objectives, and the symbols they adopted made their self-image as the party of workers the centerpiece of their identity. In most cases, their ideology was a form of socialism. But this was not invariably so. In Britain and Australia, labor-based parties were initially established without a socialist objective, and in France, Italy, and Spain, anarchist currents were influential (Bartolini, 2000, 66–87). Labor-based parties were distinctive because of their labor-based ideology, not because of the radicalism, socialism, or leftism of that ideology. The organizational structure of labor-based parties gave a uniquely privileged place to trade unions. This manifested itself through the interpenetration of party and union organizations and the cross-linkages between them. These cross-linkages usually took the form of interlocking organizational ties, although they were occasionally more informal and contingent (Bartolini, 2000, 241–262). In some cases, the party was predominant; in some cases, the unions; and in some cases, neither. But in all cases, labor-based parties were distinctive because of the central importance attributed to their organizational ties with unions, and the priority these were given over relationships with other organized social groups.³ Workers were also the most important source of support for labor-based parties. Lack of polling data before the second half of the twentieth century makes it difficult to be precise, but there is a great deal of evidence that the predominance of working-class support was a common feature of these parties (Geary, 1981, 94–97). Labor-based parties might also appeal to other social groups (like small farmers or middle-class intellectuals), but workers remained the single most important group they represented.

The kind of labor-based party that was most likely to emerge in the United States was a labor party. This was the kind of labor-based party that emerged in all the other English-speaking countries. And although some socialists persisted with other models, this was the kind of party that the main proponents

of labor-based party politics sought to establish in the United States in the late nineteenth century. It is thus also the kind of party with which I will be principally concerned.

Labor parties were established as the political wings of union movements. Unlike both social democratic and socialist parties, where Marxism and other socialist or revolutionary doctrines had an important influence, they were initially motivated more by pragmatic objectives than doctrinal ones. But labor parties themselves could take a number of more specific forms. In both the United States and Australia, the kind of labor party that union leaders sought to establish in the early 1890s was a labor-populist party, in which unions aimed to build an alliance with small farmers. In the United States, the main proponents of labor party politics sought to achieve their goal by building on and remolding the People's parties that had recently been formed by farmers' organizations. The attempt in 1894 to turn the People's party in Chicago into a vehicle for labor party politics was meant to provide a model of how this could be done.

This attempt highlights the fact that there were two ways in which a labor party might have emerged. It might have emerged as the result of a national decision by the American Federation of Labor. But it might also have emerged as a result of the successful establishment of a model party in one or more key states: a model that was then emulated and spread to others. It will be important to keep both these possibilities in mind. In order to do this, I will have to pay careful attention, not only to the national decisions of the union movement, but also to the decisions of union leaders in states like Illinois.

The claim that there was no labor-based party in the United States requires some qualification. After all, a number of socialist and labor parties did appear in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. But these organizations never attained the significance that labor-based parties attained in the rest of the advanced capitalist world. All statements about party systems require some criteria against which to determine the significance of individual parties. Just as we can meaningfully characterize the United States as having a two-party system, despite the existence of numerous minor parties, so, too, the claim that there has not been a labor-based party captures an important truth. This claim is really shorthand for the claim that there has not been an enduring electorally viable labor-based party. The most important labor parties—the United Labor parties in 1886, the labor-populist parties in 1894, and the farmer-labor parties after the First World War—were briefly able to garner significant electoral support, but they were not able to endure. The most important socialist parties—the Socialist Labor party in the late nineteenth century, and the Socialist party in the early twentieth—were enduring organizations, but despite a handful of local successes, they were not electorally significant. In other advanced capitalist countries, labor-based parties almost always became one of the main contenders for government office: backed by the support of between

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