

# OPERATION DIXIE

## LESSONS FORGOTTEN

(Southern Workers' Assembly, 2024)

### **Factual Background:**

Operation Dixie was launched by the CIO in early 1946 and ended in 1953. The organizing covered 12 southern states and was initially funded by \$3 million dollars contributed by USWA, UAW and UE with another \$3 million (not all of it collected) from other CIO affiliates. The field staff operations (about 200 field organizers) were highly centralized, and field staff were screened for 'radicalism', even to the extent that Operation Dixie organizers had to resign from the CIO PAC.

The Operation Dixie strategy followed the 1937 CIO experience particularly in auto and steel – target the bellwether corporation of a dominant industry, create a transforming event (ie, the Flint sitdown strike) that would lead to the organization of the industry. The target industry of Operation Dixie was Textile. The transforming event was to be an 'elections only' one, rejecting any organizing tactics other than Board elections and intentionally avoiding the social/racial/political climate of the southern states.

The AFL opened its own southern drive in 1946 and ended it one year later, concluding that the results did not justify the expense (of about 1500 field operatives) and that the effects of the new Taft Hartley law could not be overcome. The AFL drive was based on offering itself as the 'anti-communist' alternative to the CIO, friendly to southern businesses and to the 'southern culture',

### **Results, in brief:**

By the end of 1946 Operation Dixie was stalemated. Its over-all strategy proved a failure. From May to December the TWUA-CIO won 21 and lost 26 NLRB elections in Textile. Included in the 26 lost elections were the largest plants involved in the election contests. The TWUA was unable to bring to election the largest plants of the biggest corporations; only 4% of the Textile workforce were involved in these 47 elections.

The expected in-plant organizing committees did not form and could not be easily or quickly established. The first 6 Board elections were all losses. NLRB delays exposed the CIO's powerlessness in the face of an indifferent federal government. By 1952 only 15% of southern textile workers were covered by a union contract, down from 20% in 1946 before Operation Dixie began (8% by the mid-1960s).

It is ironic to note that Operation Dixie's demise, May – December 1946 is exactly the reverse of the CIO upsurge, December 1936 – May 1937.

In 1948 and 1949 the Center-Right CIO destroyed by raiding many of the existing CIO unions in smaller southern industries – food, tobacco, wood, and metal fabrication. CIO and AFL raids on each other resulted in almost no net gain in the South for either federation: from 1946 to 1953 the CIO took 44,000 members from the AFL and the AFL took 40,000 from the CIO.

The U.S. social and political climate moved Rightward in 1946, culminating in the first GOP Congress since 1930. The South led the way with rising Rightwing election victories in the 1938 and 1942 elections.

### **What Lessons Might We Apply:**

Perhaps Operation Dixie could NOT have succeeded in 1946. Or perhaps an Operation Dixie even under Left leadership could NOT have overcome the objective conditions. Overall however, this was an unequal battle from the start. The CIO was no match for the combination of forces that it met in the South and that was in fact changing the political climate of the entire country.

The conservative Operation Dixie leaders misread their own 'glory days', what really happened during the 1937 upsurge. Operation Dixie's leaders were ideologically opposed to the Left forces that helped create the original CIO upsurge. Consequently, Operation Dixie leaders discounted some key elements that were present in the 1936-7:

- The transforming events were made by a **committed core**, not by majority vote but through actions taken by a minority of the workers.

- By downplaying the role of the committed core and militant minority's willingness to risk **collective actions, strikes and mass picketing**, Operation Dixie leaders intended to downplay the importance such militancy. **But, Labor Board elections proved no substitute for direct action, and was incapable of creating a mass movement of workers.**
- While the 1946 conditions would not allow the big transforming event and the resulting industry-wide organizing sweep of 1937, **smaller transforming events were possible and in fact did lead to functioning unions throughout the south in wood, metal, tobacco and electrical apparatus and appliances.**
- By relying on a 'Board-elections-only, pure and simple unionism' strategy, **Operation Dixie made three fateful mistakes:**
  1. **It isolated union workers from any possible progressive allies,** stripping away support from other social movements, in particular the growing southern civil rights movement;
  2. **It de facto supported the existing Jim Crow system of segregation and oppression, furthering the divisions within the southern working class;**
  3. **It became solely dependent on one-factory-at-a-time Labor Board-conducted elections and on the new anti-union Taft Hartley Act, the same Taft-Hartley constraints we face today.**

The concentration on Big Textile further skewed the CIO's strategy. Since the industry hired overwhelmingly white workers, it encouraged Operation Dixie leaders' conservative tendency to **ignore the racial legacy** of slavery and Jim Crowism. Another was that the CIO's campaign centered on the north-south wage differential, ignoring the daily shop floor issues and grievances. In fact, those unions that aggressively fought racism and led shop-floor fights to correct grievances were much more successful in establishing southern union locals.

### **The Final Lesson**

**Most importantly, we must avoid the trap of ‘one-at-a-time’ unionism by: grouping the Board elections within the same time frame to create a mini-sweep of organizing; coordinating the contract bargaining, within and across state lines; and engaging in public actions that highlight the issues at stake.**

**Read More At:** Radical Unionism in the Midwest, 1900-1950, Rosemary Feurer, 2006; Civil Rights Unionism: Tobacco Workers and Struggle for Democracy in the Mid-Twentieth-Century South, Robert Rodgers Korstad, 2003; Southern Labor and Black Civil Rights: Organizing Memphis Workers, Michael Honey, 1993; The Southern Key: Class, Race and Radicalism in the 1930s & 1940s, Michael Goldfield, 2020; The Crisis of American Labor: Operation Dixie and the Defeat of the CIO, Barbara Griffith, 1988

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