“The 1940s were heady times for the American labor movement. The tight wartime labor market and the backing of the federal government in defense industries facilitated impressive membership gains for both AFL and CIO unions. By 1945, labor unions represented almost 35 percent of the workforce - a more than fivefold increase from the early 1930s. What is more, union membership gains penetrated previously unorganized and resistant regions like the South. Unions indeed appeared on the verge of recruiting millions of new members and establishing a truly national social movement. Critics and supporters alike viewed unions as the most powerful institutions of the day. Following the war, Fortune Magazine foresaw little resistance to unionism and to the postwar southern labor organizing drives, while sympathetic scholars like C. Wright Mills viewed labor leaders as the "new men of power."

The labor upsurge, however, was relatively short-lived. By the end of the decade the union movement found many of their organizing and political efforts thwarted. Business-led efforts to curtail unionism at the national level culminated in the highly restrictive Taft-Hartley Act of 1947. Among other things, the Taft-Hartley Act outlawed secondary boycotts, allowed for "employer free speech" during union election drives, and ceded jurisdiction to the states in the regulation of union security and Right-to-Work laws. Nelson Lichtenstein thus points to the mobilization of business and conservative forces in the immediate postwar years as a crucial turning point for labor, when the ambitions of an ascendant union movement were decidedly curbed. In explaining labor's failures during the decade, Sean Farhang and Ira Katznelson's recent work probes the institutional context in which the labor movement operated, and specifically the readjustment of southern congressional representatives on labor issues. The anti-labor orientation of the southern congressional delegation in the 1940s, the authors argue, was driven in large part by the swelling union membership in the region and the threat it posed to the prevailing racial order.

Notably, the deference to the states embedded in the Taft-Hartley Act raised the stakes of anti-labor political activity occurring across different locales. Anti-labor mobilization included a diverse set of organizations, employers, and political representatives in the states. Beginning with the conservative resurgence at the end of the 1930s and accelerating after World War II, business forces mobilized at the state level and were successful in agitating for an array of legislative restrictions on union activity, including limitations on picketing, increased state oversight of union finances, and, most important, Right-to-Work laws that outlawed union security agreements and increased the costs of collective action for labor unions.” (emphasis added)

Citation: