Jerry Wurf, the Rise of AFSCME, and the Fate of Labor Liberalism, 1947-1981

Abstract:
This dissertation explores the political ramifications of the rapid advance of public employee unionization after World War II through a study of Jerry Wurf (1919-1981), organizer, local leader, and eventually national union president of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME), one of the largest and yet least studied unions in postwar American history. Drawing on union records, personal papers, and a wide range of printed sources, it argues that the growth of unions like AFSCME simultaneously bolstered liberal forces and contributed to the emergence of popular conservatism. Organizing around government workers' aspirations for equity and dignity, AFSCME surged to the forefront of a burgeoning public sector labor movement that fought for civil rights for African Americans and comparable worth for women, rebuilt the Democratic Party in the aftermath of the Vietnam War, and reinvigorated class-based, state-centered liberal social and urban policy.

But Wurf's very success in building AFSCME set in motion developments that frustrated his union's hopes and complicated the broader liberal project. First, by winning improved wages and benefits through collective bargaining and political mobilization, unionization imposed new budgetary obligations that came under bitter attack in the poisonous fiscal climate of the 1970s. Second, the growth of unions like AFSCME transformed popular perceptions of organized labor, replacing the sympathetic figure of an exploited industrial or farm worker with the less romantic image of a government employee insulated from economic downturns, thus weakening public support for unions overall. Third, the emergence of public sector unions like AFSCME interjected an increasingly visible intermediary--the organized public employee--into divisive debates about taxes and services, creating an inviting target for the emerging tax revolt. Building on recent work that looks to the 1970s as the "critical decade" in postwar history, this dissertation shows that the growth of the public sector labor movement played an important and largely unrecognized role in lending popular legitimacy and political credibility to a discourse that pitted taxpayers against tax recipients and thrived on assaults on government programs--a discourse that still resonates decades later.

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Assessing liberalism's fate through the Carter and Reagan presidencies, the defeat of Michael Dukakis in the 1988 presidential election, and the on-again, off-again liberalism of the Clinton years, Waldman then brings the discussion up to date with analysis of the 2008 presidential campaign.

April 26, 2007, should have been a great day for liberals in the United States. By a margin of 51 to 46, the U.S. Senate voted to provide about one hundred billion dollars to fund the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, while also establishing a timetable for withdrawing troops from Iraq by March of the following year. A day earlier, the House of Representatives had approved a similar measure. Jerome Wurf (May 18, 1919 – December 10, 1981). As a national president of the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees (AFSCME), Jerry Wurf stood out as the twentieth century's most influential leader in organizing U.S. public employees. While head of AFSCME District Council 37 in New York City, he persuaded Mayor Robert Wagner Jr. to issue Executive Order 49, which in 1958 gave unions the right to organize the city's employees and the ability to serve as exclusive bargaining agents. Wurf prevailed, despite the vociferous opposition of Fred Q. Wendt, president of the Civil Service Forum, who called the order the "Wagner Slave Labor Act," which would "put caviar on the table of money-hungry union leaders." Jerome "Jerry" Wurf (May 18, 1919 – December 10, 1981) was a U.S. labor leader and president of the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) from 1964 to 1981. Wurf was a friend of Martin Luther King Jr., and was arrested multiple times for his activism, notably during the Memphis Sanitation Strike and was released just in time to hear Martin Luther King Jr's 'I've Been to the Mountaintop' oratory at the strike, assassination the next day, and attend his funeral. The Value of Labor: Transforming Unions to Meet the Challenge of Our Time. Jerry Wurf, the Rise of AFSCME, and the Fate of Labor Liberalism, 1947-1981. Hower, Joseph E. (Georgetown University, 2013). This dissertation explores the political ramifications of the rapid advance of public employee unionization after World War II through a study of Jerry Wurf (1919-1981), organizer, local leader, and eventually national leader of AFSCME.