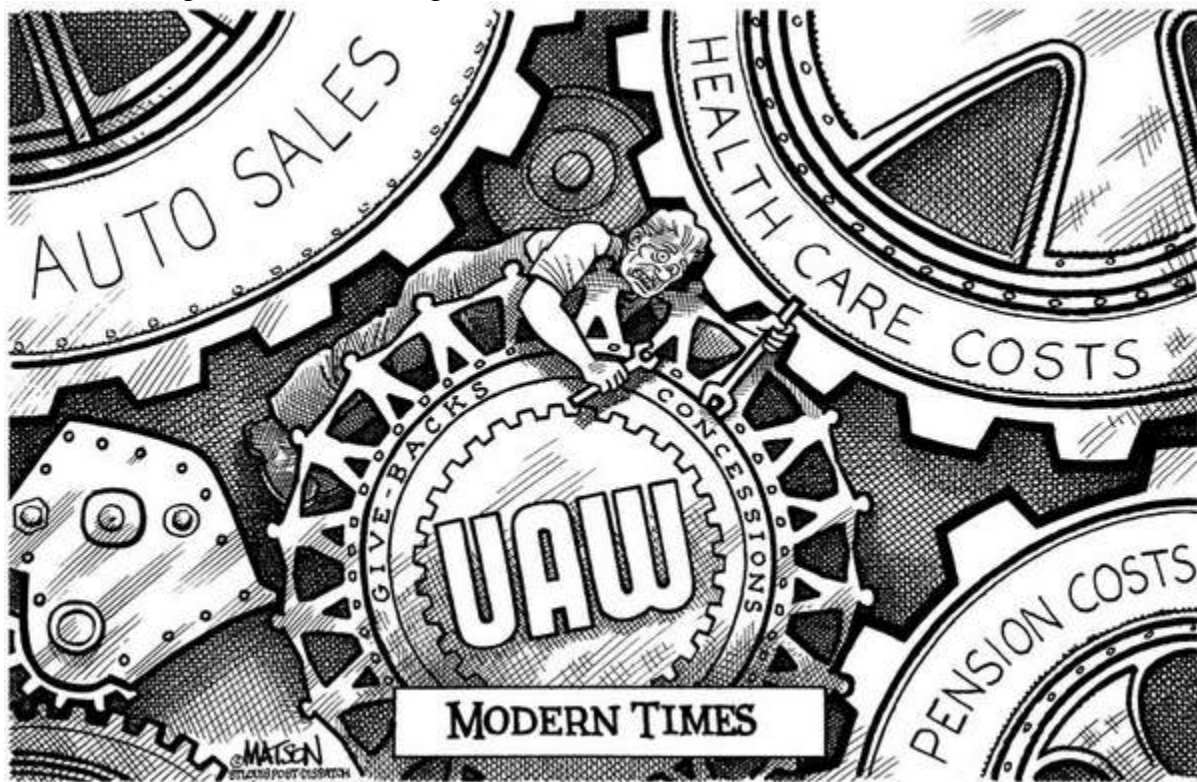


Robert H. Zieger: 'Labor did it' again



Cagle Cartoons

By Robert H. Zieger

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In 1948 when Harry Truman was asked to what he attributed his stunning upset victory over Republican nominee Thomas E. Dewey, he replied "Labor did it."

He was referring to the unprecedented commitment of financial and manpower support to his candidacy contributed by the American Federation of Labor (AFL) and the Congress of Industrial organizations (CIO), at that time separate national labor bodies.

The endless TV, newspaper, and Internet discussions in the aftermath of Barack Obama's remarkable victory brought Truman's quip to mind. Pundits have highlighted a number of factors to account for Obama's showing.

African-Americans turned out in massive numbers, awarding the Democratic candidate a remarkable 97 percent of their votes.

Obama, it appears, won the battle for the "hearts and minds" of Latino and Hispanic voters, seemingly by a two-to-one majority.

Fifty-five percent of women supported him, as apparently did a majority of voters earning over \$200,000 in family income.

Virtually every expert has highlighted the vote of young people, noting both the massive turnout among those in the 18-to-29 year-old bracket and the 70 percent support they awarded Obama.

Neglected in most of these postmortems, however, is the role that organized labor played in the campaign. Indeed, in this election the AFL-CIO and its affiliated organizations conducted labor's largest political mobilization ever.

Consider these facts:

- * Union members and their families comprised about 21 percent of the voting public.
- * Union voters backed the Obama-Biden ticket overwhelmingly. Sixty-nine percent supported the Democratic candidate. In key battleground states such as Pennsylvania, Indiana, Ohio and Florida, Obama-Biden outpolled McCain-Palin by 41 points among union voters.
- * More than 250,000 union volunteers walked the neighborhoods and distributed flyers. They made 70 million phone calls.
- * The AFL-CIO's My Vote, My Right program protected voters from harassment and petty challenges by placing 2,700 union volunteer poll monitors at key locations.
- * While McCain captured a majority among those over 65 years old, retired union members supported Obama by a 46 point margin.
- * McCain won among veterans, but union veterans went for Obama by a 25-point margin.

Labor activists are well aware that President Obama and the Democratic congressional majority will face difficult issues and will have to be responsive to a wide diversity of viewpoints.

At the same time, however, working people and their unions do expect that their efforts in the campaign entitle them to sympathetic consideration of their legislative and political goals. They are determined to promote health care reform, more equitable taxation, and changes in economic policy that will benefit low-wage and middle-income families.

They seek pro-worker appointments to regulatory bodies such as the Occupational Safety and Health Administration and the National Labor Relations Board.

High on their legislative agenda is passage of the Employee Free Choice Act, which would facilitate the efforts of workers to gain union representation and to achieve the benefits of collective bargaining.

Despite organized labor's role in Truman's 1948 victory, few of its legislative goals were subsequently realized. Recognition of the unions' efforts in the recent election may help to prevent history from repeating itself.

Robert H. Zieger is a distinguished professor of history emeritus at the University of Florida.