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Articles

“THE MORE THINGS CHANGE, . . .”: REFLECTIONS ON THE STASIS OF LABOR LAW IN THE UNITED STATES

WILLIAM R. CORBETT*

I. DÉJÀ VU ALL OVER AGAIN

You know the story of political change and static labor law in the United States: the party in power changes from time to time, but the labor law remains the same. Consider the following illustrative story.

The story begins as a Democratic President is elected. He is elected to succeed a Republican—President George Bush. During the presidential campaign, the Democratic nominee pledged to organized labor his support for the proposed legislation that was labor’s top priority item, and organized labor vigorously supported his election. The bill would have amended the National Labor Relations Act (NLRA)1 in a way that held some promise of reinvigorating unions and strengthening organized labor. Passage of the bill was organized labor’s chief legislative objective, just as defeat of the bill was the principal goal of the business community. However, the new President’s legislative priority was health care reform, which he undertook with the support of organized labor. While focusing on health care reform, the President signed an employment bill, the first bill he signed into law, but it was not the one that organized labor most fervently desired: it was an employment law, not a labor law.2 More than a year into the new Administration, prospects for passage of the labor bill dimmed. It appeared questionable whether sixty votes could be mustered in the Senate to invoke cloture and avoid a Republican-led filibuster.

* © William R. Corbett 2011. Frank L. Maraist Professor of Law, Paul M. Hebert Law Center of Louisiana State University. I thank Professors Michael J. Zimmer and William B. Gould IV for reviewing and commenting on earlier drafts of this essay. I thank Ellen Miletello, LSU Law Center Class of 2012, for her research assistance. I am grateful for a summer research grant from the LSU Law Center.


2. In the United States, we distinguish between labor law and employment law. Labor law refers to laws governing union representation and collective bargaining—primarily the NLRA and the Railway Labor Act. Employment law is the label for individual employment rights laws, such as the employment discrimination laws and the wage and hour laws. See infra, Part III.A. See generally, Benjamin I. Sachs, Employment Law as Labor Law, 29 CARDOZO L. REV. 2685, 2688-89 (2008) (discussing distinction between labor law and employment law but noting division is not always clear).
Then, an election to replace a long-serving Democratic senator produced a surprising Republican victory, further diminishing the prospects for bringing the labor bill to a vote on the Senate floor. By summer, everyone agreed that the labor bill was dead. Once again, organized labor had put its money and support behind a Democrat who won the Presidency with control of both congressional chambers, and yet the bill it desperately wanted enacted had died a quiet death.

Yes, you know the story of the Cesar Chavez Workplace Fairness Act (WFA), which died in the Senate in 1994. Oh, that was not the proposed legislation that you were thinking about? Perhaps you had in mind the Employee Free Choice Act (EFCA), which did not make it to the Senate floor in 2010 and now seems dead. For organized labor, the demise of the EFCA, the latest holy grail of labor law reform, is “déjà vu all over again.”

A. The Workplace Fairness Act

The WFA would have amended the NLRA to prohibit the hiring of permanent replacements during economic strikes, overturning a 1938 Supreme Court decision. The bill was crucial to organized labor because the right to hire permanent replacements during strikes and, more importantly, the ability legally to threaten to hire such replacements, essentially has rendered the strike, which once was labor’s nuclear option, a feckless


6. See NLRB v. Mackay Radio & Tel. Co., 304 U.S. 333, 345-46 (1938) (stating that NLRA did not require employer to reinstate replaced workers who had participated in economic strike). As has been often pointed out, the declaration in the opinion that employers can hire permanent replacements for economic strikers was dictum. See, e.g., Robert B. Moblerly, Labor-Management Relations During the Clinton Administration, 24 HOFSTRA LAB. & EMP. L.J. 31, 50 (2006).

7. Although it has been the law since at least 1938 that employers could permanently replace economic strikers, it was very rare for employers to threaten to hire permanent replacements until recent times. See, e.g., Kenneth G. Dau-Schmidt & Benjamin C. Ellis, The Relative Bargaining Power of Employers and Unions in the Global Information Age: A Comparative Analysis of the United States and Japan, 20 IND. INT’L & COMP. L. REV. 1, 14 (2010) (stating that “[a]lthough permanent replacements were rarely implemented in the years immediately after the adoption of the Mackay doctrine, American employers have shown an increased willingness to resort to permanent replacements since the late 1970s’’); see also Jack J. Canzoneri, Comment, Management’s Attitudes and the Need for the Workplace Fairness
weapon. A vivid demonstration of this point came during the election year in 1992 when a strike at Caterpillar factories in Illinois by United Auto Workers (UAW)-represented employees collapsed when Caterpillar threatened to hire permanent replacements.8 Bill Clinton, the presidential candidate, pledged his support for the WFA.9 When Clinton was elected, he made health care reform his focus, and along the way, less than a month after he took office, the first bill he signed into law was the Family and Medical Leave Act.10 When President Clinton took office, there were fifty-six Democrats in the Senate. The seat of Texas Senator Lloyd Bentsen became vacant when he was named Secretary of the Treasury in the Clinton White House.11 The victory of Republican Kay Bailey Hutchison over Democrat Bob Krueger, whom the Texas governor had appointed to fill the seat until the special election, virtually assured that the striker replacement bill would never come to the Senate floor.12 Some commentators opined that President Clinton did not put forth herculean effort to force a Senate vote.13

9. See Dogged Democrat Nears Victory: Gov. Clinton Wins Union Label, THE MACHINIST, May 1992, at 1 (quoting Governor Clinton as saying, “I don’t think it’s fair to tell workers they have the right to strike, and then tell them that means the right to lose their jobs’’); see also Karen Tumulty, Striker Bill Clears House as Battle Looms in Senate, L.A. TIMES, June 16, 1993, at A1 (referring to White House endorsement of WFA as “fulfill[ing] a campaign promise to a key constituency”). Governor Clinton also visited the striking Caterpillar workers to show his support. See Cynthia Todd, Clinton Backs Strikers’ Rights: He Endorses Bill to Ban Replacements, ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH, Apr. 9, 1992, at A1 (discussing Governor Clinton’s comments to union members).
B. The Employee Free Choice Act

In 2009, the EFCA was labor’s make-or-break bill. Since a 1974 Supreme Court decision, employers, when confronted with demands for recognition by unions based on signed authorization cards, could refuse to recognize the union, regardless of the level of support indicated by the cards, and instead wait for the union to file a petition for election with the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB). Organized labor long has argued that the limited means of recognition has been a significant cause of unions not enjoying more success in being certified as employees’ collective bargaining representatives. The EFCA would have amended the NLRA to provide for certification of unions based on cards signed by a majority of an appropriate bargaining unit.

While campaigning for President, Barack Obama pledged his support for the proposed EFCA, and organized labor supported his candidacy. When President Obama took office, health care reform was the focus of his legislative agenda. Less than a month after his inauguration, President
Obama signed his first law, the Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Act, which amended employment discrimination statutes to overturn a Supreme Court decision which had restrictively interpreted the limitations period for filing charges for pay discrimination.\textsuperscript{19} By the time health care reform had passed, a special election to fill the late Senator Edward Kennedy’s seat in the Senate resulted in a stunning Republican victory that cost the Democrats a filibuster-proof sixty votes in the Senate.\textsuperscript{20} Although the Obama Administration reiterated its support for the EFCA\textsuperscript{21} after the Massachusetts election, labor’s top legislative initiative appeared to be dead by summer 2010,\textsuperscript{22} and there were no signs of vitality at the end of 2010.\textsuperscript{23}

C. The Dunlop Commission

In addition to the mirror image debacles of the WFA and the EFCA, another unsuccessful effort at labor law reform by a Democratic Administration is noteworthy. In early 1993, the Clinton Administration appointed the Commission on the Future of Worker-Management Relations, better known as the Dunlop Commission for chair John T. Dunlop, a former Secretary of Labor.\textsuperscript{24} The Commission’s charge was to evaluate what changes should be made in the laws governing collective bargaining “to enhance productivity, employee participation, labor-management cooperation, and resolution of workplace problems by the parties themselves.”\textsuperscript{25} When the Commission delivered its recommendations in December 1994, the proposals were dead on arrival, coming one month after the Republicans swept into power under the “Contract with America.”\textsuperscript{26}


\textsuperscript{22} See Derrick Cain, \textit{Harkin Says He Does Not Have Enough Votes to Approve EFCA}, Daily Lab. Rep. (BNA) No. 92, at A-8 (May 5, 2010) (quoting Senator Harkin as saying, “We were within one vote, but something happened in Massachusetts”).


\textsuperscript{26} See \textit{id.} at 121; Moberly, \textit{supra} note 6, at 49.
Part of the 1993-1994 story during the Clinton Administration was not reprised in 2009-2010 because President Obama did not appoint a commission analogous to the Dunlop Commission. However, there was an ample backlog of employment bills pending in Congress when President Obama took office. Although he signed into law the Ledbetter Fair Pay Act, the fate of the Paycheck Fairness Act, the Arbitration Fairness Act of 2009, the Employment Non-Discrimination Act of 2009, and others may have been sealed by the midterm elections of November 2010, when the Republicans gained control of the House and eroded the Democrats’ majority in the Senate. Indeed, shortly after the midterm elections, the Paycheck Fairness Act met its demise.

II. Seismic Shifts in Politics and Labor Law Reform in Other Nations

The striking similarity of the stories in 1993-1994 and 2009-2010 illustrates a point about labor law in the United States: in recent decades, shifts in political power have not resulted in significant changes in labor law.

32. The failure to amend the NLRA is not limited to Presidents Clinton and Obama. During President Carter’s Administration, there was an attempt through the Labor Reform Act of 1977 to strengthen the remedies under the NLRA. That effort failed. See Henry H. Drummonds, Reforming Labor Law by Reforming Labor Law Preemption Doctrine to Allow the States to Make More Labor Relations Policy, 70 LA. L. REV. 97, 134-35 (2009) (noting failure of Labor Reform Act of 1977); Samuel Estricher, Improving the Administration of the National Labor Relations Act Without Statutory Change, 25 A.B.A. J. LAB. & EMP. L. 1, 1-2 (2009) (noting attempts at labor reform during Carter, Clinton, and Obama Administrations). Although one might guess that Republican Administrations and Republican-led Congresses have weakened the worker protections under United States law, the NLRA has not been significantly amended since 1959. See Cynthia L. Estlund, The Ossification of American Labor Law, 102 COLUM. L. REV. 1527, 1530 (2002). Professor William B. Gould points out that the retreat of Democratic presidential candidates on reform of the NLRA goes back to Governor Adlai Stevenson’s vacillating repudiation of the prior pledge of the Democratic Party to repeal the Taft-Hartley Act amendments of the NLRA. See William B. Gould, Taft-Hartley Comes to Great Britain: Observations on the Industrial Relations Act of 1971, 81 YALE L.J. 1421, 1422 (1972) [hereinafter Gould, Taft-Hartley Comes to Great Britain]. A persuasive argument, however, can be made that the NLRB has diluted employees’ rights and protections through its interpretations of the NLRA at various times. For example, the AFL-CIO filed a complaint with the International Labour Organization’s (ILO) Committee on Freedom of Association, alleging that a series of NLRB decisions during President George W. Bush’s two terms constituted violations of two fundamental conventions of the
Juxtapose that phenomenon with that of political changes and associated labor law changes in other nations. Consider the United Kingdom as an example. Political power changes in the last four decades have wrought dramatic changes in labor law in the United Kingdom. When the Conservatives came to power under Prime Minister Edward Heath in 1971, the government began to pass statutes to reign in powerful unions, which had flourished in an absence of regulation.33 The Industrial Relations Act of 1971 ushered in the new regulation.34 The Labour Party government subsequently repealed the law.35 The pendulum swung again, however, and the curtailing of union power hit full stride with the election of the next Conservative Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, in 1979. Under Prime Minister Thatcher and her successor John Major, the laws were changed to substantially weaken unions.36 Union density and power significantly declined. As commentators explained:


34. See Dau-Schmidt, supra note 33, at 137-38 (distinquishing labor regulation in United Kingdom from significantly more expansive regulation in United States); William B. Gould IV, Recognition Laws: The U.S. Experience and Its Relevance to the U.K., 20 COMP. LAB. L. & POL’Y J. 11, 11 (1998) [hereinafter Gould, Recognition Laws] (noting fulfillment of promise by Conservative party to enact comprehensive labor law reform); Gould, Taft-Hartley Comes to Great Britain, supra note 32, at 1423 (explaining that Industrial Relations Act of 1971 was “the first comprehensive legislation relating to labor management relations in the United Kingdom [and that] [t]he legislation attempted to both restrict union abuses in the collective bargaining arena and provide statutory protection for unions and employees”).

35. See Dau-Schmidt, supra note 33, at 138 (arguing that labor reform proved unpopular and was quickly repealed).

The sharp union decline in Britain that dates from 1979 is by now well known. Aggregate union density showed a remarkable stability in the postwar period (at around 40-45% membership), followed by a sharp rise in the 1970s, but then an even sharper fall from the late 1970s onward. Since 1979 aggregate union density has trended downward so that, by the end of the 1990s, less than 30% of workers were members of trade unions.37

The election of Prime Minister Tony Blair and the “New Labour” Party in 1997 was a significant change in political power that was accompanied by significant changes in the labor law of the United Kingdom. While the New Labour Party broke from the decidedly pro-union leanings and affiliation of the “Old Labor” Party,38 it did usher in significant labor law changes after many years of Conservative leadership.39 For example, in an attempt to reverse the weakening of unions, a statutory recognition procedure was enacted in the Employment Relations Act 1999, giving unions another avenue to gain recognition as collective bargaining representatives.40 On the other hand, New Labour did not repeal many of the


40. See generally Nancy Peters, The United Kingdom Recalibrates the U.S. National Labor Relations Act: Possible Lessons for the United States?, 25 COMP. LAB. L. & POL’Y J. 227 (2004) (comparing labor reform in United States and United Kingdom). The statute included incentives for the employer to opt for voluntary recognition rather than going the route of statutory recognition. See id. at 241-42 (discussing incentives added to labor relations process). For an informed review of the new statutory recognition procedure concluding that it encourages voluntary recognition, but not collective bargaining, see Ruth Dukes, The Statutory Recognition Procedure 1999: No Bias in Favour of Recognition?, 37 INDUS. L.J. 236, 237 (2008). While observing that there has been an increase in recognitions since the statutory procedures were enacted, Dukes argues that the statute “ignores the fundamental difference between voluntary and statutory recognition: namely, that in the case of statutory recognition, the role of legislation should be to persuade an otherwise unwilling employer to negotiate.” See id. at 266. Dukes also discusses the criticisms of the statutory recognition procedures by the ILO’s Committee of Experts on the
unfavorable laws enacted by the Conservative Government, generally favoring laws facilitating employee-employer “partnerships” rather than union-management relations. Nonetheless, the decimation of unions through legislation ended and New Labour enacted some laws favorable to unions and even more protecting individual workers. Many of the labor and employment reforms followed from Prime Minister Blair’s signing onto the European Union Social Charter from which the United Kingdom had opted out until Blair’s election. In the first year after the election of a new coalition government of Conservatives and Liberal Democrats in 2010, the early indications are that another major shift in the labor law policy has begun in the United Kingdom. Consider, for example, the new government’s proposals for substantially reforming the United Kingdom’s employment tribunals. If the government proceeds with the proposed

Application of Conventions and Recommendations. See id. at 238-39, 260-64 (discussing Committee’s reasons for concluding that statutory recognition procedure does not satisfy ILO Convention 98 on Right to Organise and Collective Bargaining).


42. See Charles B. Craver, Book Review, 55 INDUS. & LAB. REL. REV. 548, 548-49 (2002) (reviewing TONIA NOVITZ & PAUL SKIDMORE, FAIRNESS AT WORK: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE EMPLOYMENT RELATIONS ACT 1999 AND ITS TREATMENT OF COLLECTIVE RIGHTS (2001)) (discussing authors’ disappointment with Blair government’s failure to enact laws more supportive of unions); see also Friel, supra note 36, at 890-91 (discussing Blair’s vision as not including an enhanced collective role for unions).


45. The most significant change likely to occur is a major reform of the employment tribunals. The new coalition government initiated a review of the employment tribunals, which were created in 1964. In January 2011, the government released the product of that review. See DEP’T FOR BUS., INNOVATION & SKILLS, RESOLVING WORKPLACE DISPUTES: A CONSULTATION (2011), available at http://www.bis.gov.uk/assets/biscore/employment-matters/docs/t/11-511-resolving-workplace-disputes-consultation. The review stems from the premise that there have been too many cases (particularly involving unfair dismissals) and an overabundance of frivolous claims in the tribunals, costing businesses too much money. See id. at 15, 27-28. The consultation closed on April 20, 2011. If the government moves forward with the recommended reforms, there will be a number of changes favorable to employers, including several disincentives for employees to assert claims such as required deposits and enhanced cost shifting.
changes, the employment tribunals will become less hospitable forums for workers to assert their claims.

Another nation exemplifying political power shifts and concomitant major labor law changes is France. With the ascendancy in 2007 of President Nicolas Sarkozy and his party, the Union for a Popular Movement, the center-right President said that he would “break with the past” and change France’s rigid labor market and bring unemployment rates down from 8.85% to 5% by the end of his five-year term in 2012.\(^{46}\) Notwithstanding the failure of his predecessor, President Jacques Chirac, to effect significant labor law reform,\(^{47}\) the Sarkozy government embarked upon significant reforms.\(^{48}\) These reforms included the evisceration of the thirty-five-hour workweek,\(^{49}\) cutbacks on special retirement entitlements,\(^{50}\) and the Law on Modernization of the Labor Market 2008, which included a consent termination that eases the requirements of France’s for-cause termination law.\(^{51}\)

The United Kingdom and France are only two of the nations in which shifts in political power usher in significant labor law reform. The United States is exceptional. The demise of the EFCA and the WFA notwithstanding seemingly favorable shifts in political power raises the question of why labor law is so static in the United States. Professor Cynthia Estlund provided an insightful analysis of the reasons for “ossification” of labor law in the United States.\(^{52}\) The focus of this essay is to ponder why political power shifts in other nations sometimes usher in major labor law reform, while in the United States changes in political power result in little or no change in labor law.\(^{53}\) The purpose of this essay is neither to blame nor credit any politician or party for the static labor law of the United States.


52. See Estlund, supra note 32.

53. Again, I distinguish between labor law and employment law. As will be discussed infra, both major political parties in the United States have supported
nor to evaluate the merits of any particular reform. Rather, this essay presents ruminations on the reasons for the static labor law in the United States in comparison with the changing labor law in many other nations.

III. RUMINATIONS ON STATIC LABOR LAW AMIDST POLITICAL CHANGE IN THE UNITED STATES

A. The Labor Law-Employment Law Dichotomy

One key to understanding the stasis of labor law is appreciating the distinction made in the United States between labor law and employment law. Labor law refers to one type of regulation of the workplace, and employment law refers to another. Labor law is the name given to the law governing labor-management regulation principally in unionized workplaces. Employment law, on the other hand, is the body of individual employment rights law regulating non-unionized workplaces. Labor law deals primarily with the NLRA and the Railway Labor Act, which protect the rights of employees to engage in collective bargaining and other forms of collective action. Employment law encompasses the federal and state statutes and state case law regarding individual employment rights. This dichotomy is recognized neither in Europe nor in much of the rest of the world, where the term labor law is used to describe the whole body of law regulating the workplace.

significant changes in employment law while they have paid minimal regard to labor law reform.


55. See Scalia, supra note 54, at 489. In 1988, Professor Steven Willborn, discussing the labor law that is taught in law schools, observed that “[f]or the vast majority of today’s workers and employers, labor law is relevant only to the extent it considers individual employment rights, rights outside of the context of collective bargaining.” Steven L. Willborn, Individual Employment Rights and the Standard Economic Objection, 67 NEB. L. REV. 101, 102 (1988); cf. Sachs, supra note 2, at 2721 (noting that workers in United States are turning to employment laws to provide protection for their collective activity).


57. See, e.g., Bales, supra note 56, at 688-89; Scalia, supra note 54, at 490; Stone, supra note 56, at 576.

58. See generally Patrick Hardin, United States, in 1 INTERNATIONAL LABOR AND EMPLOYMENT LAWS 23a-1 to 23a-3 (Am. Bar Ass’n ed., 1st ed. 1997).
Given this distinction, one explanation for the stasis of labor law is that, even if the Democratic Party generally supports employee rights and protections, politicians of both parties long ago gave up on labor law and opted for a regime of individual employment rights laws. Politicians in the United States have not forsaken workplace regulation, but they have turned their backs on laws that facilitate representation and collective bargaining. In the past two decades during which the WFA and the EFCA failed, several employment laws of the individual employment rights variety have been enacted in the United States, including: the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990; the Civil Rights Act of 1991; the Family and Medical Leave Act of 1993; the ADA Amendments Act of 2008; the Genetic Information Nondiscrimination Act of 2008; and the Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Act of 2009. The prospects were promising in 2010 for


the Employment Non-Discrimination Act,\(^{67}\) which would amend Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 to prohibit discrimination based on sexual orientation, but the likelihood of passage has diminished. Notwithstanding the expansion of employment law, the NLRA has not been significantly amended since 1959.\(^{68}\)

Organized labor supported passage of the individual rights laws, although it was not obvious that the passage of such laws was in the best interest of unions.\(^{69}\) It is arguable that the more such individual employment rights Congress bestows on employees, the less employees need unions to bargain for rights through collective bargaining agreements. Yet, how could organized labor credibly take a different political position, given that the individual employment rights laws help workers? After almost fifty years of enactment of employment laws, it is not clear that such laws have been a factor in the decline of unions. On the other hand, it also seems true that organized labor has not devised many effective ways to use the employment laws to the mutual advantage of workers and unions.\(^{70}\)

Moreover, both political parties sometimes support the regulation of the workplace through individual employment rights, further indicating that politicians have given up on labor law and chosen to focus their efforts on employment law instead.\(^{71}\) Why the disparity? As we are rummating here, I offer several possible explanations.

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\(^{68}\) See Estlund, supra note 32, at 1555; Gould, New Labor Law Reform, supra note 17, at 2.

\(^{69}\) See, e.g., Brudney, supra note 59, at 168-69 (discussing important role of organized labor in securing passage of federal employment discrimination laws); see also Boyd Rogers, Note, Individual Liability Under the Family and Medical Leave Act of 1993: A Senseless Detour on the Road to a Flexible Workplace, 63 BROOK. L. REV. 1299, 1308-09 (1997) (discussing gradual building of support for FMLA among unions).

\(^{70}\) See William B. Gould IV, The Third Way: Labor Policy Beyond the New Deal, 48 U. KAN. L. REV. 751, 755-56 (2000) (“My National Labor Relations Board took account of the need of unions to involve themselves in the wide array of new regulatory legislation that has become such a prominent part of the landscape during this past quarter century.”). For example, this array of federally granted and protected rights in employment laws may mean little in practice if the employees cannot obtain representation, and many aggrieved workers cannot find attorneys to take their cases and file lawsuits on their behalf. See Lewis L. Maltby, Employment Arbitration and Workplace Justice, 38 U.S.F. L. REV. 105, 106-07 n.3 (2003) (citing Paul Tobias’s testimony before Dunlop Commission that plaintiffs’ employment bar turns away 95% of potential plaintiffs); Ken May, Law Professor Urges Unions to Arbitrate Workers’ Race Claims in Wake of Pyett, Daily Lab. Rep. (BNA) No. 32, at A-6 (Feb. 16, 2011) (quoting Professor Michael Green as saying that 95% of claimants cannot get lawyer to take their case); see also infra note 78 (discussing under-representation of workers with employment discrimination and employment law claims). Unions could educate employees about their rights and provide a means of representation for employees with claims under employment statutes.

\(^{71}\) See, e.g., Estlund, supra note 32, at 1530 (positing that Congress and federal judiciary “have grown unsympathetic to—even unfamiliar with—the collectiv-
First, union density has declined in this nation since the 1950s and even more precipitously since the 1970s, to the point that only about seven percent of the private sector is unionized. Perhaps politicians do not believe that collective bargaining law covers enough of the workforce to be worth the effort and political capital it takes to pass such laws. In exchange for the number of votes that organized labor can deliver, the political price of labor law reform is relatively high. It takes much effort and political capital to enact representation and collective bargaining laws because business interests concentrate their resources and lobbying efforts on killing such laws. Consider, for example, the fierce opposition of business organizations during the failure of the WFA and the EFCA. In contrast, employment laws do not attract the same level or intensity of opposition. Several employment discrimination laws were enacted at approximately the time the WFA and the EFCA were failing: the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990; the Civil Rights Act of 1991; the ADA Amendments Act of 2008; and the Genetic Information Nondiscrimination Act of 2008. Moreover, two different Republican presidents named George Bush signed all four of those bills into law.

The premises of the New Deal labor law regime as it falls increasingly out of sync with the surrounding legal landscape); Clyde W. Summers, Labor Law as the Century Turns: A Changing of the Guard, 67 Neb. L. Rev. 7, 10 (1988) [hereinafter Summers, Labor Law as the Century Turns] ("The consequence is foreseeable, if not inevitable; if collective bargaining does not protect the individual employee, the law will find another way to protect the weaker party.").

See, e.g., Estreicher, supra note 25, at 1; Gould, New Labor Law Reform, supra note 17, at 3.

See infra notes 71-72 and infra Part III.B; see, e.g., (Government) Workers of the World Unite!, supra note 37 (discussing former California Governor Schwarzenegger’s battles with state’s public unions). It is worth noting that union density does not necessarily correlate with coverage under collective bargaining agreements. In the United States, the correlation is a product of the decentralized collective bargaining in which representation and collective bargaining predominantly take place at the plant level. In France, although union density is approximately the same as in the United States, about ninety percent of French employees are covered by collective bargaining agreements. See G.J. Bamber & P. Sheldon, Collective Bargaining: An International Analysis, in COMPARATIVE LABOUR LAW AND INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS IN INDUSTRIALIZED MARKET ECONOMIES 585, 612 tbl.1 (Roger Blanpain ed., 2007). This divergence between union density and collective bargaining agreement coverage in France is the result of a centralized collective bargaining regime in which collective bargaining is predominantly at high levels, such as industry-wide. See id. at 613.

This powerful opposition mirrors the energy and money that individual employers devote to efforts to defeat unions that launch organizing campaigns at their workplaces. See, e.g., Summers, Questioning, supra note 59, at 794.


President George H.W. Bush signed the ADA, Robert Pear, Congress Passes Civil Rights Bill, Adding Protections for Disabled, N.Y. Times, Sept. 18, 2008, at A21, and the Civil Rights Act of 1991 (after vetoing its predecessor, the Civil Rights Act
It is a seeming paradox that business interests fight legislation that would strengthen labor laws—such as the WFA and the EFCA—with more energy, time, and resources than they fight individual employment rights laws. Two possible explanations for this dissimilar treatment occur to me. First, individual employment rights laws do not yoke employers to a collective bargaining representative and the concomitant duty to engage in good faith bargaining with that representative for an extended period of time. The results of the collective bargaining process—i.e., what rights and protections a collective bargaining agreement will confer on the covered employees—are uncertain, while the legal obligation to bargain and work with and through the collective bargaining representative for a period of time is certain. It seems that businesses like neither the first uncertainty nor the second certainty. Another possible explanation is that businesses understand that rights achieved through collective bargaining are much more likely to be asserted through grievance and arbitration procedures established in the corresponding agreements than are the rights created in individual employment rights statutes.78

78. The concern with the ability to assert individual employment rights claims is two-fold. First is the concern with overcrowded court dockets. See, e.g., Alan Hyde, Employee Caucus: A Key Institution in the Emerging System of Employment Law, 69 CHI.-KENT L. REV. 149, 154 (1993) (“It would be hard, however, to find anyone who believes that the nation has enough judges and courthouses to make common law litigation the modal institution of employee grievance processing.”). A second and more significant concern with employees asserting claims is whether there are enough lawyers willing to take the cases. See Clyde Summers, Effective Remedies for Employment Rights: Preliminary Guidelines and Proposals, 141 U. PA. L. REV. 457, 467-68 (1992) (“Because of litigation costs, all but middle and upper income employees are largely foreclosed from any access to a remedy for wrongful dismissal. . . . Lower income employees without substantial tort claims will have difficulty finding a lawyer.”); see also Leslie King, Mandatory Arbitration Better for Workers With EEOC, Courts Stretched, Professor Says, Daily Lab. Rep. (BNA) No. 151, at C-2 (Aug. 6, 1997) (quoting Professor Theodore St. Antoine stating that experienced attorneys accept only about one out of every hundred potential discrimination cases because they are not worth their time). The channeling of many employment claims to alternative dispute resolution has no doubt ameliorated the problems in having claims heard in court. Indeed, employers often have employees sign mandatory arbitration agreements. There are, however, concerns with whether arbitration of individual rights claims, without the involvement of a union, provides an even-handed and effective adjudication of the employees’ claims. See Martin H. Malin, Prioritizing Justice—But By How Much? Questions Gilmer Did Not Answer, 16 OHIO ST. J. ON DISP. RESOL. 589, 601-22 (2001) (discussing matters that courts should consider in deciding whether to enforce mandatory arbitration agreements’ neutrality of arbitral forum, arbitral control over discovery, restrictions on limitations periods and remedies, allocation of arbitration costs, and mutuality regarding mandatory nature of arbitration); Carrie Menkel-Meadow, Do the “Haves” Come Out Ahead in Alter-
A second reason that politicians have forsaken labor laws in favor of employment laws may be that politicians can assess particular issues and test the political winds on specific issues, such as family and medical leave, genetic discrimination, and employer electronic monitoring of employees, and then decide the political upside and downside without necessarily being placed in either the business or labor camp. As mentioned, President George W. Bush signed both the ADA Amendments Act and the Genetic Information Nondiscrimination Act in 2008 and his father had signed the ADA in 1990 and the Civil Rights Act of 1991.79 I doubt many would go so far as to characterize either President Bush as having been in the camp of organized labor. In contrast, a politician who votes for labor law reform favoring organized labor and collective bargaining is more likely to be befriended by labor and demonized by businesses and concomitantly to receive the respective favors and punishments.80 Regardless of the position a politician takes on a labor law, it is likely to provoke attention and opposition.81

See supra note 74.

80. See, e.g., Jason Kosena, Both Sides on EFCA Set Sights on Bennet, THE COLORADO STATESMAN, Mar. 26, 2009, http://www.coloradostatesman.com/content/99911-both-sides-efca-set-sights-bennet. Although he was speaking of employment laws, a statement by Deron Zeppelin, Director of Government Affairs for the Society for Human Resource Management, illustrates the concern politicians have regarding being labeled based on one’s position on labor or employment bills: “Most members of Congress, believe it or not, do not like to vote on [employment] issues, period. It is not fun to be labeled either anti-worker or pro-business. Most of them will run for the hills before they have to vote on them.” See Michael Bologna, Hill Watchers Foresee Little Activity on the Labor and Employment Law Front, Daily Lab. Rep. (BNA) No. 153 (Aug. 9, 2001).

81. Consider the curious case of former Senator Arlen Specter. Senator Specter became entangled with the EFCA: first, announcing that he would not vote to invoke cloture to bring the bill to the Senate floor; then switching parties; then proposing an amended version of the EFCA; and finally losing the Democratic
A third reason for politicians’ preference for employment laws over labor laws may be that the individual employment rights laws are imbued with an approach to law and an ideology embraced by much of U.S. society, whereas labor laws are based on an approach and ideology no longer embraced by most of society. Laws that are inconsistent with a society’s values are not likely to survive.\textsuperscript{82} Thus, labor law may be a casualty of the decline of collectivism and the rise of individualism in U.S. culture, society, economy, and labor law.\textsuperscript{83} Although individualism has been part of the American fabric throughout its history,\textsuperscript{84} it has in recent decades ascended while collectivism has declined.\textsuperscript{85} There was a period after the Great Depression during which the Wagner Act was passed, in which a collectivist approach held sway.\textsuperscript{86} That orientation changed after World War II.\textsuperscript{97} According to Professor Estlund, “Congress and . . . the federal judiciary, both . . . have grown unsympathetic to—even unfamiliar with—the collectivist premises of the New Deal labor law regime as it falls increasingly out of sync with the surrounding legal landscape.”\textsuperscript{88} Collectivist primary despite having the support of the AFL-CIO. See Jeff Zeleny & Carl Hulse, Specter, Running as Democrat, Ousted in Pennsylvania Primary, N.Y. TIMES, May 19, 2010, at A1 (discussing Senator Specter’s loss); Alec MacGillis, Specter Unveils Revised EFCA Bill, WASH. POST CAPITOL BRIEFING BLOG (Sept. 15, 2009, 2:33 PM), http://voices.washingtonpost.com/capitol-briefing/2009/09/specter_unveils_prospective_de.html?hpid=news-col-blog (discussing Senator Specter’s involvement with EFCA and position and party changes).

82. See, e.g., Reinhold Fahlbeck, The Demise of Collective Bargaining in the USA: Reflections on the Un-American Character of American Labor Law, 15 BERKELEY J. EMP. & LAB. L. 307, 310 (1994) (“The industrial relations system of any country is a subsystem within that country, along with other subsystems such as the political system, the economic system, the human relations system, and systems concerning human values (culture). A subsystem that is not in harmony with other subsystems will either change those other systems so that harmony is established, or disappear.”).

83. Although the individualism so valued in the United States often is discussed along with the libertarian or laissez faire approach to government regulation, I am not addressing the American affinity for limited government regulation and intervention. Libertarian values or not, the workplace will be regulated in some way. See Summers, Labor Law as the Century Turns, supra note 71, at 10. Thus, the point on which I focus is whether that regulation will be a collective or individual approach.


85. See Fahlbeck, supra note 82, at 320-21; see also Schiller, supra note 59, at 73 (“Since the 1960s, the labor movement has suffered from American liberalism’s rejection of the group basis of its own past and its inability to find a place for group rights within the model of individual rights it clings to so dearly.”); cf. Summers, Individualism, supra note 84, at 456 (positing that law of employment contracts as developed by judges is permeated with “economic individualism of the late 19th century”).

86. See Fahlbeck, supra note 82, at 320-21.

87. See id. at 320.

88. See Estlund, supra note 32, at 1530.
approaches to problems still invoke protestations against Marxism, communism, or socialism. Dr. Rheinhold Fahlbeck observed that “[t]he United States is not known as a land that propagates collectivist ways and means; rather, rugged individualism is the hallmark.”

Bringing the perspective of an outsider to an evaluation of the demise of labor law in the United States, Dr. Fahlbeck concluded that the labor law of the nation is discordant with fundamental values in American society, and therefore it is doomed.

B. Organized Labor’s Lack of Political Alternatives

Organized labor repeatedly puts its money and support behind candidates who profess support for its priorities. Nonetheless, even when those candidates win, the laws fail. The failures seem more the result of political processes and shifts in political winds than a lack of resolve on the part of the victorious politicians. In this setting, what can labor do to achieve its objectives?

If organized labor does not receive much return from Democrats, then perhaps organized labor will make Democratic candidates whom it supports pay a price. By doing what? Channeling support to Republicans? Generally, that does not seem a viable threat, although it may be so in specific elections. Withdrawing from an active role in politics? Perhaps, but that seems to be a high-risk strategy. Forming a new political party? One sometimes hears calls for the formation of a labor party in the United States. Such calls were loud when President Clinton and the Democrats were unable or unwilling to enact the WPA,91 and they may be renewed with the demise of the EFCA under President Obama and the Democratic Congress. However, formation of a labor party in the United States seems farfetched at this time,92 owing, at least in part, to the low union density, public indifference toward unions, and a general lack of fervor for organized labor and collective action.93 At this time, the only emergent party or

89. See Fahlbeck, supra note 82, at 333.
90. See Fahlbeck, supra note 79, at 310 (“In the U.S., the system of labor and industrial relations law is not in harmony with other subsystems. Indeed, it seems to me that the American labor and industrial relations legal system is in disaccord with fundamental features of American society to such an extent that it is—and has been ever since its enactment in 1935—by and large doomed.”)
subparty in U.S. politics is the tea party, and it is not likely to be the champion of labor.

C. U.S. Exceptionalism and Lack of International Influences on U.S. Law

“American exceptionalism” is an in vogue phrase that is seldom explained but commonly accepted as expressing some truth. One aspect of exceptionalism is that it often is used tautologically. One can explain a phenomenon as resulting from or being affected by exceptionalism or offer the phenomenon as an example of exceptionalism itself. In labor and employment law, the United States is different from most of the rest of the world in many important respects. One difference is the labor law-employment law dichotomy discussed above. Another exceptional aspect of U.S. employment law is the employment-at-will doctrine, which is the law in forty-nine states in the United States and is the basis for the United States’ reputation internationally as a hire-and-fire society.

U.S. exceptionalism, although an amorphous concept, may help us understand the stasis of U.S. labor law, and tautologically the stasis of U.S. labor law is itself an example of American exceptionalism. In short, when a nation’s politicians and judges are relatively unconcerned about—and sometimes proud of—their legal system’s divergences from the laws of other nations and international standards and is resistant to consideration of foreign or international standards, it is unsurprising that political changes do not cause reexamination of the law in light of such distinctive foreign and international standards.

Scholars have “unpacked” American exceptionalism by revealing several faces. First there is America’s human-rights narcissism, meaning the United States’ embrace of the First Amendment and its “nonembrace of certain rights . . . that are widely accepted throughout the rest of the world.” Second is American judicial exceptionalism, by which U.S. judges eschew laws and practices of other nations and international standards. Third is the United States’ employment of various methods to

95. See supra notes 54-90 and accompanying text.
98. Koh, supra note 95, at 1482.
99. Id.
exempt itself from international rules and agreements, such as nonratification, noncompliance, ratification with reservations, etc. 100 Professor Koh has come up with a modification of the third face, what he labels the “flying buttress mentality,” whereby the United States sometimes supports and complies with international standards but refuses to ratify them, thus giving it a sense of sovereignty while complying. Therefore, the United States “has it both ways.” 101 The fourth is double standards, describing situations in which the United States advocates a different standard for the rest of the world than that to which the United States adheres. 102

With American exceptionalism unpacked in that way, it is possible to see how at least the first three faces apply to the U.S. approach to labor and employment law. First, the United States was a world leader in developing an organized and articulated body of employment anti-discrimination law. Although other nations and the European Union have surpassed the United States in some respects, such as breadth of coverage, other nations developed their employment discrimination law according to the U.S. model. 103 Since the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the United States has embraced employment nondiscrimination. However, the United States lags far behind many other nations and multinational organizations regarding other employment rights, such as employment security and workplace privacy rights. 104 The United States is the epitome of a developed free market economy that is not very protective of employees. It is known for its laissez faire approach to termination embodied in the doctrine of employment-at-will. 105

100. Id.
101. Id. at 1484-85.
102. Id. at 1485-86.
104. See, e.g., Kohler, supra note 97, at 103-04 (“As is generally known, the United States historically has provided comparatively meager formal legal protections of the employment relationship. Foreign observers typically characterize us as a ‘hire and fire’ society . . . .”). Regarding the state of U.S. workplace privacy law compared with that of European nations, see infra note 116.
105. See, e.g., Dowling, supra note 96, at 13 (“American businesses are steeped in their unique and peculiar employment-at-will doctrine, which even other Anglo-system countries like England, Canada, and Australia rejected years ago.”); Clyde W. Summers, Employment at Will in the United States: The Divine Right of Employers, 3 U. PA. J. LAB. & EMP. L. 65, 65 (2000) (“The United States, unlike almost every other industrialized country and many developing countries, has neither adopted through the common law or by statute a general protection against unfair dismissal or discharge without just cause, nor even any period of notice.”). Unsurprisingly,
Second, the United States is very insular and parochial in some areas of law, and labor is among those. There is a debate in this nation about U.S. courts referring to foreign and international law. Courts rarely refer to international or foreign sources in opinions involving labor or employment issues. Perhaps more important is the reluctance of the United States to assume obligations under international labor standards.

The third facet of exceptionalism—whereby the United States exempts itself from international rules and agreements or, as Professor Koh suggests, supports and complies with them but refuses to ratify them—is well illustrated in the approach of the United States to the International Labour Organization (ILO). The ILO is the agency of the United Nations responsible for promulgating and overseeing international labor standards. The ILO has existed since 1919 and has 183 member nations. The labor standards that the ILO passes are conventions, and member nations have an obligation to submit them to the proper national bodies for consideration of ratification.

Although the United States is a member of the ILO, it has ratified only fourteen of the ILO’s 188 conventions, and only two of the eight fundamental conventions that undergird the ILO’s 1998 Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work. This is not to say that U.S. labor and employment law is inconsistent with many unratified ILO conventions. The United States has not ratified the fundamental conventions the United States has not ratified the 1982 ILO Termination of Employment Convention, which provides that “employment of a worker shall not be terminated unless there is a valid reason for such termination connected with the capacity or conduct of the worker or based on the operational requirements of the undertaking, establishment or service.” Int’l Labour Org., Note on Convention No. 158 and Recommendation No. 166 Concerning Termination of Employment, at iii, 1 (2009), available at http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/—ed_norm/—normes/documents/meetingdocument/wcms_100768.pdf (noting convention has been ratified by thirty-two countries).


on freedom of association and nondiscrimination, although the United States has national laws recognizing these rights.\textsuperscript{112} Thus, the United States does not reject some international labor standards, but it also does not fully embrace obligations under those standards.\textsuperscript{113} Another example involving ILO standards illustrates the desire of the United States to withhold ratification while adhering to the standard and requiring other nations to do so. As mentioned, the United States has ratified only two of the eight fundamental conventions upon which the four Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work are based. Yet, when the United States considers entering into an international trade agreement, U.S. law requires the fundamental rights to be incorporated.\textsuperscript{114}

When a nation feels little need to examine its standards in light of foreign or international law, it seems less likely that political changes within the nation will provoke significant law reform. In contrast, when Prime Minister Blair signed on to the European Union’s Social Charter in 1997, the United Kingdom committed itself to bringing its labor law into conformity with the EU directives.\textsuperscript{115} The absence of significant international influence means the United States is less likely to follow international trends in labor law.\textsuperscript{116} It is worth noting, however, that the U.S. government took some affirmative steps towards increased engagement with the ILO in 2010, when Secretary of Labor Hilda Solis chaired the first meeting of the President’s Committee on the International Labor Organization held in ten years.\textsuperscript{117} One of the stated goals of the Committee was to work for Senate ratification of ILO Convention 111 on employment

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{113} See Estlund, supra note, 32, at 1587-88.
  \item \textsuperscript{116} Consider, for example, that there are significant developments in the EU regarding workplace privacy law, and U.S. law in this area remains relatively undeveloped. See Matthew W. Finkin, Some Further Thoughts on the Usefulness of Comparativism in the Law of Employee Privacy, 14 EMP. RTS. & EMP. POL’Y J. 11 (2010); Ariana R. Levinson, Carpe Diem: Privacy Protection in Employment Act, 43 AKRON L. REV. 331, 339 (2010).
  \item \textsuperscript{117} U.S. DEP’T OF LABOR, ILAB Release No. 10-0496-NAT, Secretary of Labor Hilda L. Solis Chairs 1st Meeting of the President’s Committee on the International Labor
discrimination, one of the ILO’s fundamental conventions, which was submitted to the Senate in 1998.118

IV. THE ROAD AHEAD

So where do these ruminations lead us? How likely is it that significant political changes in the United States ever will lead to significant changes in labor law?

In an article published in 1998, Professor Samuel Estreicher hypothesized about labor law reform in the United States in the year 2007 after the collapse of the stock market.119 Escalating strikes resulted in a general work stoppage that virtually stymied all production and distribution in the nation. At the behest of Congress and the President, business organizations petitioned the AFL-CIO to “develop new rules for constituting the social order.”120

Well, 2007 came and with it came economic malaise in the United States and the world, but no major change occurred in labor law in the United States. It was in this economic environment that the EFCA failed. A commission was not even appointed to study labor law reform.

Experience over many years seems to demonstrate that the political stars are unlikely to align for significant labor law reform. We are likely to continue on our course of enacting and amending employment laws. As for labor law, however, “the more things change, the more they remain the same.”121 The adage accurately depicts the recent history and likely future of politics and labor law in the United States.


118. See id.


120. Id.

121. The famous adage is translated from French as, “The more things change, the more they remain the same.” JEAN-BAPTISTE ALPHONSE KARR, LES GUÉPES (1849), quoted in JOHN BARTLETT, FAMILIAR QUOTATIONS: A COLLECTION OF PASSAGES, PHRASES, AND PROVERBS TRACED TO THEIR SOURCES IN ANCIENT AND MODERN LITERATURE 443 (Justin Kaplan ed., 16th ed. 1992).
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