

US Military Personnel, Anti-Union Culture, and CIO Labor Militancy during World War II

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The Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) faced a dilemma during World War II: that the United States military, from within the ranks, was a notable source of anti-union sentiment. This paper examines how soldiers and sailors shaped anti-union politics during the CIO's heyday. Historians of labor have rightly documented the significant role played by the US military in breaking strikes in the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, but neglected the intensity of the military's opposition to strikes and the politics of the labor movement during the war as well as the significance of soldiers' opposition to wartime labor militancy. Moreover, labor historians who study anti-union politics in the mid-to-late twentieth century have rightly pointed to the problems of rank-and-file workers' ambivalence and opposition to unions, the actions taken by political and economic leaders against unions in the halls of government, and the role of the media and intellectuals in shaping an anti-union culture; but they've largely neglected the impact of the military's politics on the CIO labor movement. As this paper argues, the US military and its own war workers played a significant role in challenging the labor movement, as they shaped a powerful wartime anti-union culture that negated union goals for workers in favor of soldiers' patriotic priorities and their particular views of military sacrifice. At the same time, soldiers' emerging conflicts with working-class civilians produced further social and political divisions in an already deeply divided home front, cross-cut as it was by racial, ethnic, and gender tensions. This paper would fit on any panel related to the CIO, World War II, or anti-union culture.