

The Labor Left and Union Democracy

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By Robert Fitch

In the fall of 2008, America elected its first Black president, global capitalism descended into its meltdown mode and Chicago workers seized the Republic Windows and Doors warehouse, to the applause of nearly the entire country. Many of us believed that America was on the cusp of an historic leftward shift. We were correct about the shift; but wrong in the direction. Instead, it is the Right in the form of the deeply reactionary Tea Party movement that seems to have all the momentum. We suspected that its leaders wanted to return to the days before the Civil Rights Act; but who would have guessed that they wanted to take us back to the days before the 17th Amendment and the direct election of senators?

At the same time, organized labor in America seems weaker, more isolated, more on the defensive than at any time in modern history. Unfortunately the evidence is everywhere: the collapse of its political agenda built around EFCA; its standing in public polls; the record low private sector union density; the similarly unprecedented low level of strike activity – acutely documented recently by Steve Early; the specter of a Democratic president elected with hundreds of million in cash from organized labor, publicly supporting the mass firing of unionized teachers in Rhode Island.

And what's the response? Unlike some European countries where general strikes and boss-knapping are commonplace, here our leadership fights with press releases; with paper resolutions; with threats to retaliate against anti-labor Democrats in the fall; the AFL-CIO president, Rich Trumka assures us that EFCA is going to pass eventually. It's a leadership recognizes only one strategy no matter what the conditions: persisting in a war of position while the adversary adopts a war of maneuver. In other words, if you'll pardon the sports analogy, organized labor resembles the Ohio State football teams of the 1960's and 70's: – whatever the situation, Coach Woody Hayes and his staff always called for the same play; which came out of the same playbook. Four yards and a cloud of dust. Again and again. The difference between Ohio State coaches and our play callers, though, is that for Ohio State, the strategy of consistency worked; Ohio State won a lot of games. For organized labor its war of position strategy isn't working. And hasn't for more than a generation. In his famous lecture, *Politics as a Vocation*, Max Weber said that the secret of politics was persistence: “the slow boring of hard boards.” But surely he didn't mean persisting in failure and boring everyone to death.

If it's foolish to expect adaptive change from the labor Establishment, is it possible for the labor Left, as presently constituted, to be the change agent? Please pardon me if I express my doubts. Labor leftists are those who see organized labor not simply as a kind of forklift to raise wages and deliver them to specific groups of workers, but in terms of its potential for uniting the working class and transforming society. Ideally, they view their own involvement not as a source of livelihood, but as a vocation.

Like mainstream labor, however, the labor Left's playbook has a Woody Hayes-like consistency. And not much has changed in the way of basic analysis of labor's plight and what it needs to do since the days of Max Shachtman, the founder of the Trotskyist Workers' Party – and ideological mentor to many of America's most prominent labor Leftists.

One reason for the lack of novelty, I would submit, is that much of the labor Left is under the spell of a dominant ideology. An ideology is a body of ideas that re-arranges reality in order to justify a pattern of actions and political choices. A dominant ideology incorporates a smaller group in a larger group with different values and aims. It's not that the subordinate group is "brainwashed" by the dominant group. On the contrary, the subordinate group freely develops ideology. The point is to enjoy the benefits of subordination – often described as "resources" – while without feeling the loss of autonomy. Or the betrayal of the original values and aims. The strategy of a dominant ideology is to strain at gnats while swallowing camels.

The dominant ideology of the labor Left is probably "union democracy." Certainly not all labor Leftists believe in the primacy of union democracy. (The "Call for Labor Renewal" in 2005 by prominent labor Leftists including Bill Fletcher Jr., hardly mentioned it.) But union democrats offer the clearest sense of what organized labor must do to realize its potential. Rather than simply deplore symptoms of decline –the inability to strike, organize, create a movement, or move a political program – they offer a *structural* analysis of labor's decline. Since labor leaders depend on the structure -- -- the set of legal and political institutions on which their authority rests – such analysis risks antagonizing the leaders and reducing the possibility of gaining access to union "resources." By contrast, union democrats have the courage to dissent in a clientistic union culture whose highest value is loyalty. And where sanctions can result in a lifetime loss of livelihood. Such clarity and courage deserve the respect of criticism.

Union democracy owes its origin to Max Shachtman the brilliant, charismatic dissenting Trotskyist who co-founded the Workers' Party in 1940. He defined the field of left politics– whether in the Soviet Union or in American trade unions -- as a struggle between "democracy" and "bureaucracy" (see "Left Wing of the Labor Movement?" 1949). His use of this binary –conformed to the fundamental requirement for ideological production – that its defining terms be "empty signifiers:" empty in the sense that either they don't exist at all. Or the term's meaning is so ambiguous as to justify almost any political course.

Admittedly, Shachtman himself seems like an improbable progenitor of Left labor's ideology since Trotsky's one-time "foreign affairs commissar" wound up as the ally of the most inveterate business unionists including those promoting the Viet Nam War. By the mid-50's, he was defining the struggle for democracy as the battle for the allegiance of labor leaders rather than union members. But his political direction can be understood as a logical consequence of his premises: all labor leaders are bureaucrats. But some bureaucrats –the totalitarian Communists --are worse than others. And with the exception

of the Soviet Union itself, no Communists were more bureaucratically top-heavy and therefore more evil than the CPUSA. Ergo “union democracy” consists in the struggle to ally with the less evil bureaucrats against the most evil – the American Communists.

As Shachtman began to drift more and more to the Right, he was opposed by two of his main disciples. The first was Hal Draper –who would later write the influential, but one-dimensional, *Two Souls of Socialism*; and who also co-founded the Berkeley-based Independent Socialist Club– from which Teamsters for a Democratic Union descended – The other was Herman Benson the Brooklyn-based founder of the Association for Union Democracy. They gave “union democracy” a less paradoxical slant, one more attuned to the values of the labor Left.

In Draper’s model, two and only two vectors exist in the political universe: up and down. There’s the democratic vector. It’s made up of those on the bottom exercising pressure from below. And there’s the bureaucratic: where the topmost issue orders from above. True labor leftists help the former and oppose the latter.

Leftists however must operate with great care. First, they must make sure their opposition is loyal. “That means,” Draper said, “loyal to the interests of trade-unionism.” Second, the true interests of trade unionism demand that there be only one union – not in the Wobbly sense of One Big Union; but in the AFL CIO sense of maintaining the system of traditional jurisdictional monopolies. So a split between in a business union leading to two unions competing for the same jurisdiction is not dual unionism. Any effort to create a union on alternative foundations however is dualism and therefore deplorable. “Time and again,” he explained, “experience has showed that any kind of breaking of real, new territory can most successfully be done outside the framework of an existing organization which has become fossilized. But not outside the trade union movement.” Why AFL-CIO fossils should be an exception Draper doesn’t explain.

According to Draper any union that’s created on the basis of “some ideological aim about the nature of the union movement” is bad. Whereas a union trying to seize another’s jurisdiction is okay. Draper accepts the seeming paradox that Rosa Luxemburg and the IWW deviated from labor principles; whereas the mob-run Laundry Workers Union did not.

Given Draper’s definition of trade union interests, it’s no surprise that he would later oppose the strategy of “industrialization” that emerged within his organization – permeating the AFL-CIO with rank-and file “struggle groups” – the openly socialist precursors of what would become the non-socialist Teamsters for a Democratic Union. Drapers’ best example of true fidelity to trade union principles was his wife’s career as a middle level official with a west coast garment union.

Herman Benson, the former labor editor of the Shachtmanite *Labor Action* did support TDU. It was only one of many labor reform groups he supported and advised since he founded the Association for Union Democracy in the mid-60’s. Since then he’s become labor’s outstanding civil libertarian; it’s hard to think of anyone who’s done more to

defend workers' Landrum-Griffin rights. Any regular reader of AUD's Union Democracy Review, or Benson's blog will find no sharper or more knowledgeable criticism of union autocracy. That the academic leftists who organized the 1995 Columbia University "Teach-In with Labor" could exclude him said more about their stature than his. Unfortunately, though, Benson sees politics and trade unionism in almost exactly the same binary terms as Draper and Shachtman.

For him American politics exemplify the "eternal conflict" between bureaucracy and democracy. According to Benson, the labor movement is a great pillar of American democracy. "But this great pillar of democracy," he observes, "is itself nibbled away by the mice of bureaucracy...to paraphrase Emerson 'Bureaucracy is in the saddle and is riding mankind.'" Bureaucrats stifle the energies of the workers; they make them apathetic. It's the job of Leftists to help the workers chase the away the bureaucratic mice away by making their unions more democratic.

But what is "democracy"? Benson gets testy when forced to confront this question. It seems academic to him. What could it possibly mean other than plain old American democracy? The Bill of Rights as conceived by the founders. Or as he puts it "democracy-democracy." More critical reflection might unravel a paradox that ought to concern Benson. Unions – like the Teamsters -- have become a lot more democratic in the sense he offers without becoming more democratic in a more substantive sense. Prior to Landrum-Griffin (1959), elections weren't federally mandated. Many unions didn't have them. Or had them only rarely. Now at least there is what political scientists call "minimal" democracy – there are elections; there is competition between politicians for votes. But no sense that workers are sovereign or that union regimes are democratic in the sense Lincoln made famous: of, by and for the people.

The Teamsters have gone from mob-domination to what may be America's most democratic union – at least in Landrum-Griffin terms. But since inception of direct elections for national officers in 1991 and federal election oversight (which brought down reformer Ron Carey) fewer Teamsters participate in them. In the last election, only about a quarter of the members bothered to vote even when provided with mail in ballots. It seems as if the struggle for democracy produced a lot more political vitality than "democracy" itself.

Apathy can't be explained, as Benson would have it, by the bureaucratic trampling of union civil liberties. Because bureaucrats don't normally run unions. As anyone who's ever worked as a union bureaucrat will attest, they do what they're told by elected officials. Andy Stern's rule over the SEIU has been seen by Benson and others as the triumph of centralism and bureaucracy. Stern created his own barons from his entourage, whom he sent out to rule the provinces. But last month, labor's would be King John met his Runnymede. The barons said, "No mas!" Stern's resignation and their refusal to ratify his chosen successor as president, illustrates just how powerful the centrifugal forces working to empower the local baronies remain in the US model of unionism. The King can make barons; but the barons get local fiefdoms that give them the potential to unmake the King.

In our system, which features 25,000 semi-autonomous locals, the elected officers win office not because they have the support of the staff. It's actually the other way around. They have the support of the staff because they win elections. And they win elections because they've built a political machine made up of patronage followers who exchange loyalty to the union boss for positions and perquisites. The machine can usually count on staying in power as long as it delivers a union premium and --in craft unions --keeps the out of work list short.

Benson notwithstanding, political apathy is a natural product of this one-party machine culture – and of the narrow restrictions on the political agenda created by local autonomy. These confine the worker to a low political horizon shaped by his local's contract and his own individual grievances. Just like district politics in the south Bronx or ward politics on the southside of Chicago, union micro politics rarely offers workers the opportunity to consider much less exercise leverage on wider, supervening issues.

That the local union acts as a kind of political Lunesta is bad. Worse though than the centrifugal forces isolating workers, are those antagonistic forces created by the goal of the local union premium. The whole legal infrastructure of based on exclusion, coercion, and exclusive bargaining is designed to enable local members to earn a wage higher than those doing the same work outside the local. Unsurprisingly, the local union member tends to see other workers in competitive terms: both the non-unionists undercutting his contractual wage– as well as other unionists seeking to take “his” work . Whereas the most basic aim of unionism is to unite workers by taking wages out of competition.

My first sense that there was something deeply wrong – not just with this or that labor leader or even with their collective propensities -- but with foundations of American unionism came on a picket line. It was being manned by a Local 608 carpenter who I later got to know and work with on *Hard Hat News*, a rank-and-file paper. He was an Irish-American very active in the carpenter reform movement who at the time was picketing the use of non-union labor in a Wall Street office- to -residential conversion that was so common during the downturn of the early 90's. The workers on the job were Asian carpenters. Patrick expressed no racial animosity. He simply insisted that Asians were welcome to join the union. Only though, if they could persuade their contractor to become a union contractor. So the non-union workers faced a real catch-22. They were regarded as scabs because they were working non-union; but effectively, they weren't allowed to join the union either. This exclusionary feature of craft unionism goes back to the 19th.c. J.S. Mill criticized it; so did Engels. Union democrats don't.

The real democracy deficit in American labor unions is not that the locals are bureaucratic. It's that there are American style locals at all. What's missing from the one-dimensional ideology of union democracy, imprisoned in the metaphor of bottoms and tops, is any sense of the scope of political conflict.

The aim of the Right is always to restrict the scope of class conflict – to bring it down to as low a level as possible. The smaller and more local the political unit, the easier it is to

run it oligarchically. Frank Capra's picture in *A Wonderful Life* of Bedford Falls under the domination of Mr. Potter illustrates the way small town politics usually works. The aim of conservative urban politics is to create small towns in the big city: the local patronage machines run by the Floyd Flake's and the Pedro Espada's.

The genuine Left, of course, seeks exactly the opposite. Not to try to democratize the machines from within but to defeat them by extending scope of conflict: breaking down local boundaries; nationalizing and even internationalizing class action and union representation. As political scientist E.E. Schattschneider wrote a generation ago: "The scope of labor conflict is close to the essence of the controversy." What were the battles about industrial and craft unionism; industry wide bargaining sympathy strikes, he asked, but efforts to determine "Who can get into the fight and who is excluded?"

The first step in the transformation of American unionism in the 21st century is to get beyond exclusion, and coercion, accomplishing a task that unions in other countries accomplished as early as the 19th. A labor Left that breaks with the old playbook will bypass the autonomous local union, it will fight to end monopoly unionism, creating a system of representation that's based on consent, offering workers a choice of political ends; transforming finally a culture that breed sectionalism into one that promotes solidarity. Because what the left Labor needs is not union democracy but working class democracy.