

H. W. Benson

Divided Soul of Labor Leadership

The following is excerpted from H. W. Benson's book, published last year by the Association for Union Democracy and entitled Democratic Rights for Union Members.

Soon after George Meany became its president, the AFL embarked on a campaign against corruption in unions, a battle that was continued by the newly merged AFL-CIO when it expelled the Teamsters and other unions and adopted Ethical Practices Codes. But, by 1959, the AFL-CIO had abandoned the effort. Benson finds part of the explanation of that failure in the divided soul of U.S. labor leadership. —EDS.

Most labor leaders, if they could choose at leisure, would surely opt for a clean labor movement, just as most automobile owners would prefer clean air. But they find the cleanup requirements too disagreeable.

To root out corruption, it was imperative to invigorate union democracy, encourage members to rise against suspect leaders, and protect those who might be victimized. The sorcerer's apprentice could conjure up the rushing waters but lacked the secret of controlling their power. Those who lead labor are willing, when necessary, to summon their members to battle with employers; but they prefer not to risk unleashing the power of internal union democracy against union officials.

To become an effective leader, with power, secure status, influence, and money, a union leader is compelled to develop a dual personality. He cultivates the qualities of a responsible public statesman but also those of a crafty politician; he remains a workers' leader but simultaneously evolves into a bureaucrat.

As leaders, union officers collectively are spokesmen for millions of wage earners. In private bargaining and public negotiations, often in great strikes, they help lead the way to a better life: pensions, health insurance, better pay, shorter hours, vacations, a measure of security. As leaders, they wield power in national elections, in political lobbying, occasionally in mass demonstrations.

In a hundred years, a majority of America's industrial working class, beginning as a beast of burden, rose to the status of self-respecting and

respected citizens of the United States. After assessing various analyses and criticisms—they might have done better, they could have done worse—we can reasonably surmise that this historic transformation was achieved by a labor movement headed by a mixed bag of leaders perhaps not too different from those we know today. The long ordeal of farm workers, extended battles with Farrah and J.P. Stevens, bitter mine strikes are not remnants of a forgotten past, they are a modern reminder that the essential role of unions and union leadership continues.

A self-image—workers' tribune and nation's statesman—is surely implanted in the consciousness of every competent labor leader, bringing justified pride, a sense of fulfillment, the satisfaction of leading a useful life. In this role, history sees union leaders at their most admirable: John L. Lewis carrying the CIO flag, then braving wartime hysteria to defend the miners; Walter Reuther at the battle of the overpass and in the great sit-ins; and, even if on a less heroic scale, George Meany speaking out for low-paid sweatshop workers during Nixon's wage freeze, when labor's liberal friends were silent.

In their identification with a great social movement, in their capacity as workers' leaders, most union officers would surely rejoice to see a labor movement purged of corruption, wholly dedicated to its membership, honored for its democracy and enlightenment. But they continually fall short of their own ideal standards; as union politicians—as distinguished from union leaders—

they are men of power, driven by the need to hold tight to that power.

As a politician, the union officer develops special talents, sometimes those of a bureaucrat, sometimes of a dictator, but always the ability to maintain and strengthen his own base. He formulates programs and switches them, exchanges enemies and friends, makes and breaks alliances; and through all the permutations and combinations, one thread of consistency remains: he jealously guards his own power in his union against even the remote shadow of threats. To solidify that power he apportions patronage jobs in the union, in industry, in union welfare funds. As a politician he demands personal loyalty from the union staff, which almost everywhere in the labor movement becomes the administration's political machine.

As a leader he often sets out to arouse his members; he organizes, seeks support during tough negotiations and strikes, calls them out to vote in public elections. And for that, he stimulates the worker's self-respect and sense of social justice, sometimes against employers, sometimes against government officials. Stand up for your rights! Solidarity! Don't be intimidated! You are as good as they are!

But as an official, jealous of power and determined to stave off opposition, he ordinarily tries to impose a different mood in the union. Don't make waves! Go along! Don't complain, especially not to outsiders! Sit down, shut up! The leader stirs up passion against bosses; the officials implant acquiescence toward themselves.

The union leader readily slips into the state of mind of the official. As he performs memorable deeds, he can easily imagine that his personal talents alone assured success, not the power of the social movement he represents. Spring comes only because he plants the grass seed. Obsessed with the notion that his union can prosper best under his leadership, he feels in his bones that he and his followers must continue to hold power, come what may. Or even without the dizzying breezes of noble philosophical rationalization, the official may resist surrendering power simply because he has learned to love its perquisites.

Running a union is a rough job, and union leaders enjoy their reputation of being "tough-minded." As tough politicians, it is difficult for them to accept the absurd notion that their role in historic events should depend upon the passing whims of workers who drop pieces of paper into ballot boxes. They take shelter behind a bureaucratic stockade against the savage thrust of

democracy. Before legislation gave some federal protection to internal union democracy, many union constitutions buttressed the officialdom by outlawing caucuses, outlawing handbills, suppressing free speech, penalizing members for going to court. Oppositionists were ruled off the ballot, elections were stolen, trusteeships were arbitrarily imposed upon rebel locals. Most of these practices are now illegal, but are often continued by subterfuge. The distrust of democracy remains, nicely illustrated by what David McDonald, when he was Steelworkers secretary, once said to the union's research director: "I never could trust anyone I couldn't buy."

Recognizing common qualities in each other, expecting and admiring them, union leaders come to accept a tacit agreement on noninterference in each other's internal affairs. If there is any single unforgivable offense in the labor movement, it is the mortal sin of supporting internal opposition in some other leader's union.

The opposing forces that tug at labor leadership act upon the whole labor movement, creating that great paradox: seen from one angle, the labor movement is a powerful force for democracy and social progress; but from another, it is often undemocratic and repressive in its own internal life.

As a last-ditch defense against challenge, a union officialdom is protected by the right of most international executive boards to rule on disputes and appeals. With this power, the officers are transformed into a union supreme court that can cut down critics and bolster supporters at every level of union structure.

ONE HONORABLE EXCEPTION is the United Auto Workers' union. Under Walter Reuther, the union established a Public Review Board composed of respected persons outside the labor movement and independent of the union power structure, known for their attachment to democratic principles and their sympathy for unions. The Board serves as an impartial highest court with jurisdiction over complaints and appeals, except those relating to collective-bargaining policy. It is armed with authority to overturn decisions of the union's top bodies including the International Executive Board. By relinquishing some of their own power to the Public Review Board, UAW leaders strengthened their union's democracy.

Public Review has not weakened UAW officers as leaders; in effect, it limits their authority only as union politicians. Nevertheless, not a single major union now emulates the UAW. The leadership of,

say, the Machinists, the Steelworkers, or the big electrical unions would not crumble if their members gained access to a truly nonpartisan union appeals body. Rejection of the public review principle, in all likelihood, arises out of an ingrained, almost pathological, distrust of the unpredictable consequences of democracy. No danger today? Who knows what tomorrow may bring. Better hold tightly to every ounce of power, especially the right to deal with dissenters.

Since 1958 the official labor record on internal reform has been bleak. Faced with new massive exposures in the building trades, on the waterfront, and elsewhere, Federation leaders took no public notice and remained silent. They had tried reform and had abandoned it as hopeless.

In the 30 years since the end of World War II, not one major union is reported to have taken any significant lasting step to strengthen the rights of members in their unions, except the UAW with its Public Review Board. In two unions, reform leaders were murdered: in 1965, Lloyd Green and Dow Wilson were assassinated when they threatened to uncover the theft of Painters insurance funds in California; in 1970, Jock Yablonski, leader of an insurgent group in the United Mine Workers, was killed. From the AFL-CIO no word of protest or outrage. When votes were stolen in the Painters, in the Miners, and in the Steelworkers, no comment from AFL-CIO leaders.

On the other hand, AFL-CIO union leaders have consistently opposed the interests of union democracy in key court cases. In *Salzhandler vs. Caputo* (1963), the Brotherhood of Painters opposed the basic rights of free speech in unions. In *Calhoon vs. Harvey* (1965), the AFL-CIO joined the Marine Engineers Beneficial Association against the right of union members to go to court in union election cases. In *Brennan vs. Bachowski* (1975), the Steelworkers intervened to argue against allowing unionists recourse in court against arbitrary and irrational decisions of the Secretary of Labor on election complaints.

The wheel has turned full circle. There are unions where members' rights are respected, unions that prove that the labor movement can be strong, *and* clean, *and* democratic. But there is still the unfinished task of rooting out corruption where it is entrenched, of restoring democratic rights where they are suppressed. With no sign and little likelihood of renewed initiative from the nation's influential labor leaders, the prospect for reform from above seems remote. If there is to be hope and help, it must come from somewhere else.

The destiny of union democracy is frequently linked to social ideology or political platform: the program of my opponent inexorably undermines it, while mine will surely protect it. The anti-Communist is convinced that the threat to workers' rights in their own organizations stems principally from Communist totalitarianism and from its fellow-travelers; he is confident that union democracy will be adequately served so long as a general laborite-democratic policy prevails in the nation. The left-wing revolutionary is equally convinced that union democracy is endangered simply because the dominant labor leaders are, in his opinion, agents of the imperialist bourgeoisie in the ranks of the working class; he is certain that the whole problem will vanish as soon as the old *mis*leadership is replaced by a new, genuinely revolutionary, leadership.

But the history of the labor movement and the experience of workers under various social regimes have shown that there is always the need to defend workers' democracy—regardless of who leads or claims to lead the working class, whether that leadership is procapitalist, prosocialist, or pro-Communist. The difficulties of union democracy cut across the lines of social and political programs; they arise not from ideology but from life, from the contrasting, sometimes antagonistic, interests of workers and their own leaders.

There is nothing novel in this thought; it was developed in detail some 60 years ago by Robert Michels in his analysis of workers' leadership in European social democracy. As a classroom abstraction, his ideas percolate through the thinking even of those labor intellectuals and educators who ordinarily refrain from applying such notions to the mainstream of the American labor movement. When we consider the state of union democracy in the United States, however, they begin to have more than classroom implications.

Officers and members share a common outlook on most social and political issues of the day, but when it comes to union democracy there is often a bitter conflict of interest. The officials are amply equipped with power to take care of themselves under almost any conditions; but without internal union democracy, workers have no guarantee that the union will continue to protect their wage standards, pension funds, job security, health, and safety. When workers lose control of their union, and they have nowhere to turn inside the labor movement, they must look outside. Although their

union may have become dictatorial, they live in a democratic country; and so they turn for support to the government; and they seek allies in the community, allies who share a common interest in democracy and who, unlike most labor leaders, are not inhibited from supporting democracy in unions.

The right of workers to organize won the support of government in the mid-1930s; unionism rose swiftly and spectacularly. The right of workers to democracy in their unions was backed by federal law in 1959; progress has come, but slowly, slowly. □

David Salomon and Jules Bernstein

The Corporate Thrust in American Politics

Since the late '60s American business has consolidated its organizational structure so as to vastly increase its political and economic power. A recent *Fortune* magazine article, entitled "Business is Learning How to Win in Washington," detailing many such changes, opens with a conversation between two lobbyists for the Business Roundtable on how to defeat the Consumer Protection bill:

Just a few blocks from the White House, in Room 811 of one of Washington's least memorable office buildings, this conversation is going on between two men, one of whom is holding a list of congressmen in his hand:

"Henry Gonzalez of San Antonio . . . should we use Sears? We have problems with Jake Pickle on this, I'm not sure we can get him . . . OK, let's ask Sears about Gonzalez. . . . Delaney of Long Island . . . well, Delaney's a character still he was helpful as chairman of the Rules Committee. . . . Bristol-Myers is close to Delaney, let Bill Greif handle that. . . .

"Gaydos of Pennsylvania . . . ask Alcoa if they'll do it, John Harper was very enthusiastic about this one. . . . Hatfield of Continental could do it but I hate to ask him. . . . Marks of Sharon, Pennsylvania . . . ask Ferguson of General Foods to call Kirby of Westinghouse about Marks. . . .

"Gore of Tennessee . . . Carrier Corp. and TRW

. . . do we really have a chance with Gore? We really think we do? Ask Lloyd Hand of TRW. . . . Let's be careful . . . but if we haven't done our job by now . . . but we have, we've got the votes and we know it."

The secret weapon of this new corporate campaign is the corporate Political Action Committee (PAC). The 1975 election laws permitted enterprises to solicit management for funds and then to donate up to \$5,000 to a political candidate. After the resolution of the *Sun Oil* case, which clarified how executives may be solicited, the use of PACs by corporations has skyrocketed. Today there are more than 1,000 PACs compared to 139 in 1974. The total net worth of corporate, trade association and right-wing PACs is \$54 million, in contrast to \$13 million for labor.

The ultraright has entered the PAC arena in a major way and now controls more than \$6.5 million in PAC funds. These include the nation's three largest PACs: Ronald Reagan's Citizens for the Republic (\$2.1 million), National Conservative PAC (\$2 million), and the Committee for Survival of a Free Congress (\$1.5 million). Experts anticipate huge increases in probusiness PACs.

Fortune also reported a growing trend toward political cooperation among business groups to defeat proconsumer and prolabor legislation. Such coalitions offer two major attractions. First, they permit the business community to share expenses for lobbying efforts. Over 100 organizations lobbied against situs picketing, 400 against consumer protection, and 600 against labor law reform. In the last case, *Business Week* (11/22/78) reported that \$5 million was spent by such groups (not to mention the \$2 million spent by the National Right to Work Committee). Second, such coalitions establish huge umbrella organizations, which can draw on extensive grass-roots networks, skilled lobbyists, and the clout of prominent corporate Chief Executive Officers (CEO).

Perhaps central to the new business strategy is direct lobbying by businessmen and especially CEOs, who have become the new political power brokers. Unlike older breeds of corporate lobbyists, congressmen know that these individuals often control corporate policy.

In order to exploit this idea, trade associations have established "direct-contact" networks in every state and congressional district. At the push of a Telex button, hundreds of executives are on the phone to their congressmen. The Associated General Contractors organization has 113 "legislative network chapters" around the country, while the Chamber has 2,200 "Congressional