

1. Democracy Is Power

If our real goal is strong unions—powerful ones—why bother with democracy? Because we have to. Let's look at power and democracy.

We learned in Civics class where the original word *democracy* came from. In Greek, it's *demos*—the people, *kratein*—to rule. The people rule. All the procedures and protections that we usually associate with democracy—elections, rights to debate, a free press, for example—are simply means to achieve the power of the people.

The procedures (the means) are often confused with democracy itself (the goal), for two reasons. First, the procedures are usually necessary to reach the goal of democracy. The more complicated our society, the more we need division of labor, representatives, leaders, experts, and rules for how to make decisions. Second, it's in the interest of those who don't want the people to rule that we get distracted from the goal and hung up on the procedures instead. We will talk more about this later.

Where do unions fit in?

To begin with, unions exist to give workers power in society, where the bulk of the economic and political power is held by those few who control the corporations. When unions make working people more powerful, they are imposing some democracy on a society which otherwise is not very democratic at all.

The basic reason working people organize unions is for power over pay and conditions in the workplace; that is the most important

place where members measure the union's strength, and also where we measure union democracy. No matter what happens at meetings or conventions, the union will not be democratic unless members control its actions on workplace issues.

That's why union reform efforts are strongest when their message is, "We need to fix the union so it can win changes the members need at work." If members think a bylaws change will make it easier to win grievances, they have a good reason to come to a meeting to vote on it. If an opposition slate has a better idea on how to deal with forced overtime, it may seem worth the effort to campaign for that slate. Union democracy is about power in the workplace.

Most union members would agree that the United States could use a healthy dose of democracy, especially in the workplace. But that does not automatically mean that democracy is the best method for running a union. If there were a non-democratic way to run

Democracy and Corporations Go Together Like Pacifism and Ice Hockey

Unions promote democracy in two ways. First, to the extent that unions—even bureaucratic ones—offer a counterforce to the power of corporations, they play a crucial role in democratizing society.

Second, unions themselves are held to democratic standards, if imperfectly so—by their own principles, by the expectations of society, and by law. Members have avenues for reforming their unions.

Compare the expectation of democratic rights, even in a highly bureaucratic union, to your rights on the job. The corporation makes not even a pretense of democracy, or protection of anyone's rights except the owners' and managers'. In a nonunion workplace, you can devote your most productive years to serving a corporation and then be fired for speaking your mind, or for not appearing enthusiastic, or for any reason at all except the few specifically prohibited by law.

If the standard to which we hold unions is democratic rights, the standard the society holds for corporations is bottom-line profits. By their nature, all unions contribute far more to the level of democracy in our world than does any corporation.

unions that gave workers more power in society and against the boss, then members would have to consider it.

In fact, there are many people—members as well as leaders—who believe that democracy actually weakens the union. They say it's a luxury that only gets in the way of unity and swift action. Few leaders will say this in front of the members, of course. In the Teamsters, for example, officials who had tried for years to keep members from having the right to vote for their president gave convention speeches in favor of it when the election was imminent. But behind closed doors, you would hear some union staffers or officers assert, "Members aren't interested in democracy; they're interested in results. We'll get good results if we the leaders just come up with the right plan."

Or they may simply leave democracy out. A clear example of the "militancy without democracy" point of view appeared in a spring 1996 article by Stephen Lerner, published by the Boston Review. Lerner was architect of the SEIU's Justice for Janitors campaign under John Sweeney, and then became an AFL-CIO staff member.

Even a Little Democracy Counts

The 1987 and 1990 UPS contracts were bargained under similar conditions: the same old guard union leadership and the same financially healthy company. Both contracts were negotiated without strikes and without union-sponsored contract campaigns. But the 1990 settlement was substantially better for UPS Teamsters.

The difference was the amount of member control. In 1989 the government forced the union to schedule a membership vote on international officers, who control national bargaining with UPS. The election campaign was well under way in 1990 when old guard officials announced they'd bargained a much better pay package at UPS than the one they had gladly accepted in 1987.

As Ken Paff, national organizer of TDU, put it, "The officials couldn't say anymore to the members, 'We don't care.' They had to care."

Officials had to care because there was widespread dissatisfaction with the 1987 settlement and this time around, even a little discontent could cost bargainiers their jobs. That little bit of democracy was worth an extra \$1.23 an hour for UPS Teamsters.

Lerner rightly notes that unions can only inspire workers if we abandon “partnership” with corporations. Instead we need to show that we can take on and beat aggressive employers. He proposes an action program for the labor movement, calling for mobilizing the most active one percent of union members into “an army ready to risk arrest...to bring whole cities to a standstill.” Certainly such action is needed.

But one plank was missing: Lerner said not a word about rank and file initiative or control of these militant actions. Quite the contrary; Lerner clearly means officials and staff when he says “we” should build campaigns that “give our members reason to be involved.” Workers are to be “activated,” in Lerner’s word—a cannon fodder version of organizing. In this view, member control is not relevant to rebuilding unions.

But far from being a distraction, internal democracy is key to union power.

First, a union will act in the interests of members only if those members control the union. If members do not control their union, then others tend to run it in their own interests—management, the mob, or officials seeking to preserve their easy job and comfortable lifestyle if not line their own pockets; the opportunities are just too rich to be passed up. Even a leader with a personal commitment to the members’ interests, but who lacks serious input from them, is vulnerable to the other interests just mentioned.

Second, the power of the union lies in the participation of its members, and it requires democracy to make members want to be involved. A union that tries to function without member involvement becomes weak no matter how well intentioned its officers. Officers seeking participation without asking what the members want to accomplish will be frustrated.

A union run by the members is also more likely to exercise its power. When the members run the union, they have chances to measure their collective strength against the boss, and gain the confidence to use it. When members, for instance, see that a cartoon they’ve posted on the union bulletin board really shakes up the supervisor, they start thinking about other ways to push that boss’s discomfort into positive changes (and they think up more cartoon ideas). Yet many unions keep their bulletin boards behind locked glass.

When members are in the habit of using their heads to figure out the problems of running the union—handling disagreements among themselves, setting priorities for scarce resources, and learning each other’s concerns—they have more effective ideas for dealing with management’s assaults as well. Conversely, if the rank and file can’t even control their local union, how are they going to “control” some aspect of a big corporation? Who’d dare to try?

Does democracy make the union more powerful in every instance? Democratic rule allows, even guarantees, that members will make mistakes—even serious ones. For example, leaders may worry that members will believe management’s fear campaign and want to give concessions that will undercut another local. Such concerns are real, but are not valid arguments against democracy.

First, there is no evidence that any system other than democracy is less prone to mistakes. Indeed, we have ample evidence that the self-proclaimed experts are fooled at least as often as the members. One example: throughout the 1980s and 1990s, “experts” and leaders signed on to a string of labor-management cooperation fads. When members were cynical about the “flavor of the month” new program and reluctant to give up union rights, leaders chalked it up to “thinking inside the box” and fear of change. As it turned out, the members were right and the experts were wrong. Any reader from an undemocratic union will have his or her own examples of strategic mistakes by officials that most members could have avoided.

Second, members have the right to make their own mistakes; they deserve to decide for themselves how best to improve their lives and their children’s lives.

Third, as members learn from and correct their mistakes as a group, they’re better able to avoid repeating them. An individual “dictator” seldom has a clear view of his own failed policies—and he has a stake in not admitting them.

Democracy with its mistakes and inefficiencies works better than any other arrangement. See the boxes on the Machinists at Boeing and the Teamsters at UPS for examples.

A union that operates purely top-down may appear strong, or at least united, if members are willing to follow orders. But if members lose faith in their commanders, and have no other way to make decisions or to exercise collective power, they’ll end up acting as individuals instead. The results can be disastrous: members scabbing, or

engaging in militant but foolhardy individual acts, or most likely abandoning the cause. This is one of the reasons (not a justification) that there were members who scabbed during the UAW's strike at Caterpillar in the 1990s: members weren't consulted on strategy at any point, and had no collective way to try to turn around what

Machinists Right To Review Leads to Victory

by Carl Biers

At the Boeing Company a fight for democratic reform in union practices led to victory over management. In 1995, officials of the Machinists local lodges (local unions) at Boeing agreed to a demand put forward by reform caucuses in Seattle and Wichita. As contract negotiations approached, officials announced that for the first time, members would have three days to review the tentative contract before voting on it.

The reform caucuses had demanded this window because of their experience three years earlier. Seattle members had voted on a deal only moments after it was presented to them at a mass meeting. Later, they discovered that the agreement they had voted on was incomplete; officials continued to negotiate in secret over several unresolved issues. When the contract was finally distributed, four months after the ratification meeting, it contained language that members had never voted on.

In 1995, the ranks used the three-day period to demonstrate their unity and opposition to the contract with marches and rallies—some led by rank and file activists, some by union officials who could see which way the wind was blowing, and others erupting spontaneously. One group marched through the huge Everett, Washington complex, banging on their tool boxes as they went. A group in Wichita occupied the plant for two days.

Thirty thousand members overwhelmingly rejected an agreement that would have loosened protections on contracting out and required workers to pay a portion of health insurance premiums. Instead, workers embarked on a militant strike. After six weeks on the picket line, they voted by 61 percent to reject yet another offer, this one endorsed unanimously by union officers at all levels. Finally, after ten weeks on the picket line, workers returned to their plants with an agreement that maintained tighter restrictions on sub-contracting, added no co-pays on insurance, and included substantial

looked like a losing operation.

Confidence in leaders can come either from a history of those leaders' winning regular gains, or from the ongoing interchange between leaders and members that we call democracy. Since these

wage increases and a signing bonus.

In rejecting their leadership's recommendations, Machinists handed the labor movement its best victory of the 1990s to that point. But the victory might never have happened if the membership had not had the opportunity to review the contract. The three days proved to be a crucial period for members to show the company, union officers, and themselves that they were prepared to strike.

A pre-vote review period had been a demand of reformers since the mid-1980s, but caucus organizing began in earnest in both cities in the early 1990s. In 1992, the Seattle area caucus, known as the New Crew, ran for office in the first widely contested elections in the lodge's history. They won several offices and managed to pass a motion in support of contract review at one lodge meeting. Meanwhile, in Wichita, Unionists for Democratic Change, running on a similar platform, won spots on the executive board of Local Lodge 834.

Reformers also challenged another undemocratic practice, a rule designed to keep the union in the hands of incumbents. As in most local unions, attendance at union meetings was low. A bylaw requiring attendance at six of the previous twelve meetings in order to be eligible to run for office disqualified 98 percent of the members of most lodges. In 1992, with the assistance of the Association for Union Democracy, insurgents complained to the Department of Labor that the rule had disqualified some candidates.

Shortly before negotiations with Boeing began in 1995, the DOL announced new regulations invalidating most uses of meeting attendance rules. Faced with the threat of a snowballing insurgency, and without the meeting attendance rule to insulate them from challenges, the incumbents decided to adopt one of their opposition's most popular proposals—the three-day waiting period.

The Boeing story shows how, even without control of the union, caucuses won a key reform that made possible a big labor victory.

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days significant improvements are near impossible to come by without a mobilized membership are near impossible to come by, unions had best rebuild democracy.

When Members Get It Wrong

One of the most demoralizing experiences for reformers is for members to vote against reform candidates or to reject referenda aimed at giving members greater rights. Why do members “get it wrong” and vote against their own rights and interests? The very powerful forces that unions must contend with, which operate inside the union as well as outside it, help explain why members sometimes expect to gain more power—better jobs or pay, more job security—

Taking on Big Brown

The clearest example of union reform leading to union power is the national UPS strike of August 1997. Although the Teamsters were not a thoroughly rank and file-run union, five years earlier members had bucked the union’s hierarchy and elected a new reform leadership. Changes at the top of the union combined with 20 years of education by TDU made the difference between beating UPS and not taking on the company at all. (For a description of TDU see the Introduction.)

TDU members at UPS had organized for years against productivity harassment and for including part-timers’ issues in union demands. Their discussion of working conditions over the years prepared UPSers to see through the company’s rhetoric on 1997 bargaining. TDUs then became many of the key frontline warriors to organize the union campaign and strike, even where old guard leaders dragged their feet.

The Teamsters’ contract campaign began in 1996. That year, the union surveyed UPS members about bargaining issues, reported the results, and announced contract goals based directly on survey responses. This contrasted with the more usual practice of not setting specific goals for fear of raising members’ expectations too high. (The UAW Bargaining Convention, for example, passes a resolution every three years for “a substantial wage increase.”)

In announcing their goal of 10,000 new full-time jobs, union leaders showed that it would be up to the members, later, to decide whether any proposed agreement came close enough to that goal; the

by some method other than union democracy.

The most powerful force a union faces is usually the employer. Management starts with power simply because of an economic and legal system that assumes management rights unless otherwise specified. Whatever the issues members are concerned about, it is the employer who gets to set the terms of the debate. It is management who decides whether the business will stay open or whether the agency will be privatized, what products will be made, in what places, by whom, and with what processes. Often the union is in the position of reacting to management initiatives.

Management operates inside the union, too, by its power to divide workers by favoring one group or individual over another,

bargainers would not be able to say “really we were shooting for 1,000 new full-time jobs.” (Leaders did lower the goal from 15,000 jobs to 10,000 during pre-strike negotiations.)

In framing the issues, union leaders paired the full-time jobs question with the demand to stop contracting out; that way, all major sections of the workforce were involved in the struggle. Leaders trusted members to see the importance of the issues, and to stay unified if the company offered something (like pension improvements) that benefited only full-timers. That trust was confirmed later when the members stuck together on the picket lines and became the best spokespeople to local news media on the strike issues.

International officials were also clear they needed rank and file involvement to succeed. Where local officials were slow to distribute campaign information or materials like buttons or whistles, the international sent them directly to rank and file activists. Again, top officials trusted the members; they could not expect to control from Washington how materials were used.

UPS management devotes considerable attention to winning workers’ loyalty, and before 1992 the international union had not challenged them in this arena at all. Management fully expected that within a week or so, Teamsters would start crossing the lines and the strike would be broken. But the months of preparation paid off; the strike was solid, and the victory was the biggest the labor movement had seen in many years.

The victory was possible because so many UPS workers felt that the struggle belonged to them.

whether it's through distribution of overtime or race discrimination. By offering better conditions and advancement to those who show their "loyalty," management can always find people willing to carry out its bidding in union affairs.

Management also exercises its power directly on the union structure. It's common for management to let it be known which candidate for union office they'd prefer to "work with." In some unions, it is traditional that the best route into management is to become a steward first. Or management can set up a system of thinly disguised but legal payoffs: jointness junkets and ease of getting overtime pay keep some officials addicted to their positions. Leaders

Members Vote to Let George Do It

The June 1997 local union elections at the NUMMI plant in Fremont, California show how members' view of business unionism can guide their actions. The business union-oriented Administration Caucus retook the United Auto Workers Local 2244 top offices from reformers in the People's Caucus. In a key vote, former Shop Chair George Nano ousted People's Caucus leader Richard Aguilar from that position.

The election had broad significance because the NUMMI plant has been the first and foremost model of lean production, team concept, and Japanese methods in the United States. Created as a joint venture of GM and Toyota, and operated by Toyota, the plant regularly hosts delegations from workplaces around the world. Yet a brief strike at the plant in 1994, and the company's many anti-worker policies, gave the lie to many of the myths of labor-management cooperation.

Until shortly before the 1997 election, the People's Caucus had confidently expected victory. The local executive board dominated by the Administration Caucus was responsible for chaotic financial practices that finally resulted in trusteeship. Aguilar, on the other hand, had been an aggressive, hard-working shop chair. Whereas grievances had been systematically discouraged under Nano in favor of joint problem solving, Aguilar set in motion training programs for all committee people of any caucus on how to pursue grievances. He was generally regarded as someone who was fair and put the membership first.

Why did the People's Caucus lose the top spots? People's Caucus members and others have suggested a variety of reasons,

can choose to base their power on the company's power rather than the rank and file's. Union leaders offer a cooperative relationship with the company, helping to run the workplace and discipline the workforce. In exchange, the company offers its power to help union leaders keep their positions by rewarding friends, punishing enemies, and occasionally making the officials look good.

Looking to management and its allies for protection may seem to offer an easier, safer course than democratic unionism.

Take the case of SEIU Local 32B-32J, which represents janitors, doormen, and elevator operators in New York City. The president of

some special to the circumstances: some say the People's Caucus started its campaign late, over-confident, and poorly organized. But mainly the members were lured by the business model of unionism. Nano was able to appeal to the illusions that members often have about unions and politics alike: leaders deliver the goods. If you don't like what you're getting, fire the bunch. Then go home and wait. "Are you a new-hire who doesn't like the two-tier negotiated in the last contract? Don't ask how you should organize to change it; just vote for me."

It was the membership belief in this service model that allowed Nano to pin the blame for unpopular contract provisions on Aguilar, despite the fact that Aguilar had opposed them and was in the minority on the bargaining committee.

The People's Caucus itself failed to counter the business union message. Many of their leaders thought they could use the same "We-do-it-all-for-you" approach as Nano. It's not that People's Caucus members were against membership mobilization. But it was never a part of their UAW training and consciousness. They underestimated the anger the members had with the day-to-day operation of the NUMMI system and did not recognize that clean and fair grievance administration was not enough. Members wanted something done.

Because the People's Caucus did not have the cooperation of either the UAW international or the company, the good service campaign just bolstered the Administration Caucus's claims that it could get more; they were the ones with connections to powerful people. The only power the People's Caucus had was its base in the membership. The more effective, though difficult, strategy would have been a campaign that emphasized membership initiative and action.

the local, Gus Bevona, makes multiple salaries totaling about half a million dollars, plus considerable expenses and perks. In 1997, reformers in the local called for a referendum on cutting officers' salaries (Bevona would have had to get by on \$122,000 a year), and on electing rather than appointing the business agents who are supposed to handle daily representation duties.

The reformers lost 55-45 percent (they needed two-thirds) but went to court because of election irregularities. The judge ordered a new election, noting that members had to mark ballots in view of union officials who were wearing "Vote No" stickers; ballots were in English only (many members speak only Spanish); there was only one voting place in the city, with limited hours; and the ballot carried a message from the leadership urging a no vote.

The reformers welcomed the ruling, convinced that with a fair vote—to be conducted by an outside agency—they would surely win. But when the vote was held in February 1998, Bevona won by 70 percent. To be sure, there were election irregularities, including an enormous amount of official campaigning on union time. But probably more important was Bevona's campaign. His machine created a climate of fear—on both a general level (the union, jobs, and pensions will be destroyed) and on a personal level (support the reformers and your business agent may forget about you). The Bevona machine, by its own power and by its close relationship with the employers, was able to make such fears credible.¹

If you spoke to Gus Bevona about this campaign, he would probably express a conception of unionism that justifies his pay and power. Members too adopt views on how unions work that become powerful supports for the status quo and barriers to democratic reform. We now turn to consider these conceptions. We'll look at different models of unionism, the belief in the "powerful provider," and the smokescreen around democracy.

The Business Model of Unionism

Most Americans unions, local and international, operate as though they were a business providing services to customers. The customers are the members and the employers. In this view, the union is the officers and staff. They provide services for members, including grievance handling, contract bargaining, and various social services; that's why staffers often have titles like "servicing

rep" or "business agent." Paying dues to the union is like hiring a lawyer. The lawyer is the expert and you turn your case over to her. She tells you what to do and what your choices are.

In the boom years after World War II, business-model unions were able to deliver wage increases without much activity on the part of the rank and file. Nearly every contract contained substantial improvements. Management could pass on increased costs to consumers; they were ready to deal.

But the basis for such deals fell apart in the 1970s. Competition from now-rebuilt factories in other countries meant profits could be maintained only by reducing costs, including labor costs. Although

Looking for the Powerful Provider

The 1998 election for president of the Teamsters, where James Hoffa "Junior" won 55 percent of the vote, is an example of the appeal of the "powerful provider," the strong leader who will do it for the members. Invoking his father's name and using the slogan "Restore the Power," Hoffa called up an image of the strong man pounding on the table and causing the bosses to shrink back in terror.

TDU, on the other hand, when the group campaigned for reformer Tom Leedham, didn't promise immediate success against the employers' offensive. They reminded members that victory would require lots of hard work.

Hoffa offered easy results: take one Hoffa, mix with union office, and get instant Teamster power. The members didn't have to do anything difficult, take chances, or use their own valuable time. All they had to do was mark the ballot for tough guy Jimmy.

Given Hoffa's other advantages, including a mesmerized press, a huge campaign budget, and a three-year head start on the campaign (Hoffa ran and lost against Ron Carey in the over-turned 1996 election), it is a victory for the rank and file model of unionism that he won only 55 percent of the vote. Apparently over the years many members had come to learn that the way to power was not through blowhard leaders.

Hoffa expounded again on his theory of union power after the UPS strike when he told the press, "You want a union with a lot of money in the bank, and a strong leader. That's what gets an employer's attention."²

recently some union officials have begun to discuss new strategies to deal with the vastly changed situation, most still rely on the business model whose success ran out decades ago.

The business model precludes democracy by denying knowledge to all but the experts. Members don't have the opportunity to learn about winning grievances, bargaining, or figuring out strategy, and the idea that they need servicing becomes self-fulfilling. As contracts become more and more complicated, the existence of experts is justified.

The question of expertise is then used against any group of members that questions officials' strategy. A recurring theme in incumbents' campaign literature, for instance, is the checklist on expertise, noting that the rank and file challengers have "never bargained a contract, never prepared an arbitration case..." Of course not! Only the officers are involved in those processes.

The business model is not just the product of controlling union officials. It serves the interests of management and others who seek a compliant, "business-like" union. Instead of dealing with various, often angry, rank and filers, management would rather deal with someone who dresses and talks much like themselves, someone who has far less at stake in a decision on working conditions—a "business agent."

Of course, the business model as described here is the best version, where leaders actually do try to deliver for the dues-payers. Worse is the "no-service" model, where office holders see the union as a means to enrich themselves, a barony to be handed down to sons and nephews. With high-paying jobs at stake, these autocrats will use any tactics to retain their perks. They may use undemocratic rules to prevent members from running for office. They may ask management to fire members who speak out at union meetings, or retaliate against them at the hiring hall. They may hire detectives to follow dissidents. In such unions, the rank and file's tendency is toward cynicism and passivity; it's remarkable that some do form caucuses and run for office under these circumstances.

Most local unions are not this bad, of course. But even where leaders are not corrupt, where members do seem to have every opportunity to take control through honest elections, it's still not common for a sizable group of rank and filers to get together and say, "Let's take back our union and run it ourselves." Why?

The business model has definite attractions. Who wouldn't prefer to "leave the driving to us," as Greyhound used to advertise? Union members have demands on their time, from kids to church to overtime. Why go through all the headaches of meetings, debates, campaigning, all the frustrations of trying to convince others to be active, all the possible repercussions from management, if the local president can deliver the goods instead? It's comforting to think that all you need for a strong union is a strong leader who can take care of you.

Members thus can easily get stuck between a rational desire to be "serviced" and the frustration that comes when their hired leaders don't deliver, as happens more and more often. And if finally new leaders are elected who do want members to take responsibility, they are frustrated when members resist getting active. Our entire culture has taught them that it's the officers' job, not the members'.

Almost everything in our society teaches the message that we *can't* do it ourselves, anyway. In particular, the relationship between boss and worker starts, from the moment of hiring, by establishing that the boss has power and the worker has none: the worker needs a job to live; the employer can pick and choose whom to hire. Much of the new technology and the de-skilling of jobs leave the worker with less power than before. Advertising reinforces the idea that our only "power" in the world is to acquire more stuff (but we get to choose which brand). In the face of all these messages, it's no wonder that many union members don't even try to take back their unions.

The Organizing Model

In the last few years, many union activists have talked about replacing the "servicing model" of unionism with the "organizing model." Under this method of functioning, members are involved and active on their own behalf. For example, rather than a steward simply writing up a member's grievance, arguing it out with management behind closed doors, and reporting the results six months later, the organizing model would have him talk to lots of members about the issue and get them to sign on, making it a group grievance. If management is stubborn they pull an action of some kind, such as all wearing stickers on the same day. If necessary they escalate to actions that disrupt the work flow, like all visiting the boss's office together. They're in motion; they're organized.

The organizing model is a big step forward from the servicing model, but it can have limitations. In practice, some union leaders encourage member *involvement* without member *control*. They expect to turn member involvement on and off like a faucet. That way, leaders can keep tighter control of a possibly volatile situation. When the rank and file await their marching orders from clever staffers or officials, there's less likelihood they'll undertake tactics that step outside conventional boundaries, or threaten deals made elsewhere.

An example was the "mobilization" for the Detroit newspaper strike. In the strike's early days, in September 1995, local leaders called a rally and march on the newspapers' printing plant. Members and supporters, feeling a sense of strength, decided to stay overnight at the plant gates to block scab trucks from exiting with the important Sunday edition. When the companies obtained an injunction against picketing, leaders quickly turned the mobilizing faucet off and ordered members away from the gates. They held no meetings

An Organizing Model that Falls Short

When unionists talk about discarding the "servicing model" of unionism and building an "organizing model," sometimes the wires get crossed because "organizing" means two different things.

For some, the organizing model means member mobilization. For others, the organizing model means that the union should change priorities to put more resources into recruiting new members. A large percentage of the budget should go to the Organizing Department, and staff resources spent on "servicing" the already organized should be decreased.

In this second sense, the "organizing model" is not enough. It's true that protecting working conditions for the already organized depends on spreading unionism. But the most effective organizing tool is a winning union—a union its members can brag about. As John Sweeney told the 1997 AFL-CIO convention, "You could make a million house calls and run a thousand television commercials and stage a hundred strawberry rallies and still not come close to doing what the UPS strike did for organizing."

After the 1997 UPS strike, more UPS workers than ever contacted the Teamsters Organizing Department to volunteer for the

to discuss the decision, or even other tactics. Instead, they tried to turn members' energy toward a much tamer tactic—leafletting for a boycott of the newspapers' advertisers. Denied the opportunity to choose or even discuss strike strategy, members' participation dropped.

Top-down mobilizing tends to be inflexible, to say, "Here are the steps. Follow them." Now that various unions have involved members in contract campaigns, there tends to be a formula for how to carry them out. The steps are predetermined and members are not involved in making decisions on when or how to act. If the manual says "petition day comes before sticker day," that's the way it's got to be.

Members are often enthusiastic when first invited to get involved in organizing model-type actions. But they may have their own ideas about effective tactics or timing. If they're not allowed some say in the new actions, they'll eventually vote with their feet. If enough members are turned off this way, the actions fail. In the

drive at Fed Ex. The best organizers are empowered union members; that means bringing in new members has to be combined with winning better conditions for current ones.

Another example is the organizing done by UAW Local 3000, based at a Mazda-Ford joint venture in Flat Rock, Michigan. These assembly plant workers helped organize four smaller parts plants that supplied Mazda. The local recruited members to work on the campaigns and invited workers from the targeted plants to union awareness classes. Mazda workers made home visits and leafleted the plants: "Have no fear. We are three thousand members strong! Come join us." A week before one election, a 150-car caravan traveled 50 miles past the home of the plant manager on the way to a union rally.

The Mazda workers joined in enthusiastically to recruit their lower-paid sisters and brothers because they had experienced power in their own local. Earlier, a reform slate had won office against officials who were management's partner in implementing "lean production" when the plant opened. Many Local 3000 members had never belonged to a union before, but after electing reformers they organized an aggressive contract campaign and a spontaneous protest against an unfair attendance policy. The union was theirs, and they were glad to invite others to be part of it.

long term, top-down mobilizing does not develop new leaders. Nor is it the best way to get members to volunteer to organize new workplaces; how inspired can you be about your union if you have no say in it yourself?

Enthusiasm for the union is also key to building solidarity beyond the membership; potential supporters are mostly inspired by person-to-person contact and seeing that the people involved are active and making even greater sacrifices. But if the members of a striking union participate only as troops following marching orders, they're unlikely to inspire others; their solidarity does not become infectious. Some of the best-known labor solidarity efforts have depended on "road warriors": rank and filers who took up their cause as a full-time job and traveled to spread the word about Local P-9 at Hormel, Pittston, the Staley lockout, Ravenswood, the Diamond Walnut strike.

If democracy helps build member involvement, why not? Officials who want the ranks involved as troops often see rank and file *leadership* as a risk. Members may gain skills and confidence; they may demand even more say-so. Members who take initiative may run for office or in other ways get out of control. They may, for instance, organize a job action about working conditions the week after union and management officials agree to a cooperation program.

The case of the janitors of SEIU Local 399 in Los Angeles is an example of the "faucet" approach to mobilization. When SEIU staff were organizing these mostly Latino immigrant cleaners for union recognition, they conducted a whole range of militant actions. Janitors staged civil disobedience to disrupt business as usual in luxury office buildings and were beaten by the police. Finally they won a union and a contract.

Then they found themselves in a 25,000-member citywide SEIU local run very much in the old style. Suddenly it was business-as-usual unionism. In response, the janitors joined with health care workers to organize a dissident slate called the Multiracial Alliance for the local's first contested election ever; they won every seat except the presidency (which they did not challenge). The old president refused to cooperate, there was some tumult—and the SEIU's president, John Sweeney, threw the local into trusteeship. The rank and filers had violated the understanding that their militant organizing was to stop when the staffers turned off the faucet.

Since the term "organizing model" can mean either a top-down version or a bottom-up one, we won't use that term in this book. When we want to talk about getting in the boss's face, and members having the chance to shape whether, how, and when to do that, we'll talk about "democracy" and "rank and file power."

Our constant emphasis on the rank and file does not mean that we're against strong leaders. On the contrary, democracy makes leaders stronger—they look over their shoulder, and they've got someone behind them. We're describing a healthy relationship between leaders and the ranks, not a way for the ranks to eliminate

With a Flick of the Faucet

One sign of top-down mobilizing is quick about-faces in basic strategy. SEIU's Justice for Janitors campaign in Washington, D.C. switched from militancy to "cooperation" with building owners with the writing of one open letter. Justice for Janitors campaigns have mobilized tens of thousands of building cleaners in various cities to demand union recognition. A partially successful ten-year campaign in Washington included sit-ins and blocking bridges. In early 1997, SEIU President Andy Stern decided to turn off the faucet: he sent a letter to building owners pledging to stop "strikes, picketing and similar activities" in return for the hope that owners would pressure the contractors who directly employ the janitors.

Before, the building owners were considered part of the management team that benefits from holding down pay and working conditions. Now, the union was proposing to the owners a partnership, and saying to all those janitors who helped stage protests, "You may now go home."

There is nothing wrong with unions changing strategies, and union leaders should be able to make occasional quick, perhaps drastic, tactical shifts. But each time such a top-down shift is made, there's a cost to members' confidence in their leaders. If union officials have not already proven they'll seek full democratic decision-making wherever possible, or if officials chart a course that most rank and filers would have opposed given the chance, the cost will be high. In the janitors' case, it seems unlikely that many of them changed their minds about the building owners in May 1997 just because Stern wrote his letter; we expect they'll be disheartened and less willing to participate the next time.

leadership. In fact, as we discuss in Chapter 2, the relationship between an empowered membership and a strong leadership is a central part of union democracy.

Democracy and the New AFL-CIO

Since 1995 the AFL-CIO has seen big changes at the top levels. The election of new, energetic leaders was a boost to unions' image. John Sweeney's New Voice team, and thousands of lower-level officers, staff, and activists in various unions, are calling for rebuilding labor by organizing the unorganized and making political action count. In many places, they're calling on members to get involved in these projects. What the New Voice team is not calling for, though, is a new, more democratic way of running our unions.

A Little Mobilization

To their credit, the new AFL-CIO leaders encourage membership mobilization on several fronts. They encourage affiliates to train members as volunteer organizers; they envision "street heat" teams to carry out cross-union solidarity actions; and they propose a "permanent base of at least 100 union activists in each Congressional district" to augment the work of paid lobbyists on Capitol Hill.

But there's mobilization and there's mobilization. Without a big increase in democracy, the faucet model is the only way the labor movement can mobilize people.

One sign of faucet-style mobilizing is large numbers of staffers with their hands on the tap. Both as president of the Service Employees International Union and at the AFL-CIO, Sweeney has dealt with just about any issue by hiring more staff: the 50 new state AFL-CIO directors plus four new regional directors and their assistants hired in 1996-97 are one example.

Choosing Sides

One of the big reasons for top-down mobilizing is a need to control where and when mobilization is to be used. Often top-down mobilizers advocate militant tactics, up to and including civil disobedience, for organizing the unorganized. But such tactics are seldom encouraged when established unions confront management.

This is because the leaders of most international unions—along

with the AFL-CIO leadership—are committed to labor-management cooperation. As Sweeney told the 1997 AFL-CIO convention, "One of our paramount goals is to help the companies we work for succeed, to work with our employers to creatively increase productivity and quality and to help American companies compete effectively in the new world economy and create new jobs and new wealth for our families and our communities to share."

Under this win-win scenario, union members benefit without cutting into profits. The problem, of course, is that companies continue to cut jobs, bust unions, and contract out work even when the union is thoroughly cooperative. They're searching for even more profits, and they're not planning to share.

If you're a labor leader who believes in cooperation, though, you have only one criterion for deciding who's a bad employer, to be mobilized against, and a good employer, who deserves cooperation. The employers who allow unions to exist in their facilities are the good ones. We only get militant toward employers that don't recognize the union.

This charting of good employers and bad employers can get pretty confusing. Companies are often switched from one category to the other without any noticeable change in workers' pay and conditions. That's why the cooperators and the top-down mobilizers don't trust the members to decide their own strategy. The question is too subtle to leave in the hands of anyone but top staff.

The AFL-CIO's commitment to labor-management cooperation, and the good employer/bad employer distinction, is illustrated by the partnership with Kaiser Permanente, a health maintenance organization. This arrangement was signed in 1997 by the federation and the affiliated unions (SEIU, AFSCME, and others) that represent Kaiser workers.

Under the agreement, Kaiser gets the AFL-CIO's commitment to aggressively market Kaiser to unions as a health plan; in late 1997, SEIU launched its "I Choose Union Healthcare" campaign as part of fulfilling this promise. What the unions get is recognition on the basis of a card check at any newly-organized Kaiser facilities. Plus, union officials will sit on joint partnership committees for non-binding discussion of future changes in Kaiser's operations.

The AFL-CIO initiated the partnership at a time when Kaiser was systematically cutting jobs, speeding up employees, demanding

pay cuts, and planning to close facilities and contract out major operations. Kaiser workers have charged that quality of care is being hurt badly, and federal investigators have cited serious deficiencies. But because the AFL-CIO unions are now bound to market Kaiser, they will have to keep their mouths shut about problems with the quality of care. They will lose an important weapon in their fight against these conditions—the possibility of drawing on public support.

What unions gain is a chance to organize Kaiser workers without employer resistance. Kaiser joins the ranks of “good” employers.

Cooperation is a mistaken strategy, and it tends to distance union officials from the members since those officials must always be sensitive to management’s needs. In theory, members could choose cooperative strategies; democracy doesn’t guarantee good choices. In reality, though, most union members exposed to cooperation programs quickly find that management’s “actions speak louder than words” (this was the Teamsters’ slogan about UPS’s team concept program in the months before the 1997 strike). Workers in partnership programs find the employer is still trying to squeeze more work out of fewer people, and they are understandably angry.

When union officials are committed to cooperation, rank and file anger must be repressed to maintain good relations. Seldom are the ranks involved in deciding when, and over what issues, to end a joint program. Officials who favor cooperation believe the members would end it with little provocation, and they’re probably right. That’s why it’s important to officials that they keep control of that decision.

In many ways, the AFL-CIO’s plans for revitalizing labor are very ambitious; in other ways, they continue the same old policies. But even the AFL-CIO’s version of revitalization will not go far without democracy, without rank and filers organizing themselves. The massive scale of organizing now proposed, for instance, can’t happen under staff control, if only because of the numbers; members must be out there telling their stories, sometimes acting on their own initiative. And members will have the stories to tell only if we increase union strength through democracy.

The Smokescreen Around Democracy and Power

One of the reasons members don’t take control of their unions is that they don’t equate democracy with power. Why not? Partly because corrupt union leaders, and even more so corporations, have an interest in maintaining a smokescreen around democracy and power. Members are led to see themselves as dependent on their elected officials, and to see democracy only as a question of mechanics.

The confusion begins with what schools teach and the media reinforces. Ideas about power are not what we’re taught in school. We’re taught that democracy means simply the right to make a free choice between two candidates, with no stuffing of the ballot box.

Likewise a union is said to be democratic if it has conventions, elections, votes on contracts. But conventions usually act as rubber stamps for top officials, elections may be organized to exclude most of the members as candidates, and contract votes are often taken without providing a true and thorough description of the terms.

In other words, these forms and procedures don’t guarantee rank and file power in the union. Certainly conventions, elections, and contract votes are necessary steps, but democracy depends on an ongoing process of involving the ranks in knowing and grappling with the real issues facing the union—a process that’s not automatic every time a member is handed a ballot. Holding delegate elections where candidates don’t discuss the big choices facing the union, for example, is a smokescreen for backroom decisions on those choices.

Another smokescreen is the confusing ideas we’ve been taught about power—that it means strong-man, individual power, and power over others. School conditioned us to look at history in terms of great people taking heroic actions. Didn’t Lincoln free the slaves? Didn’t Walter Reuther build the UAW? Didn’t Ron Carey win the UPS strike?

Even within the union, power is seen as power to appoint, power to punish your enemies, the power of your machine. Thus power becomes identified with intense personal competition.

Perhaps because of this strong identity between power and personal competition, or perhaps because they’ve been on the receiving

end of dictatorial power in the union, some union members try to give their leaders as little power as possible. In practice, this usually backfires: formal, above-the-table power is replaced by backdoor and informal power, which is less accountable. The answer is not to try to abolish power but to counter personal power with cooperative power.

You will recognize the style of personal, *non-cooperative* power shown below from the way corporations, armies, and other non-democratic institutions function. Unfortunately, this mode is also reflected in how powerful people act in non-democratic unions. Individually and as a group, we have more to gain from cooperating to build our power.

Cooperative power operates differently.

Two Kinds of Power

Union Official Controls Others	Members Cooperate to Wield Power
Control over other people	Control over the problems imposed by the external world
Control over information	Spread information widely
Keep people ignorant	Educate people
Pit people against each other	Identify common interests
One moves up at expense of others	People move up by building others up
Members' involvement is passive: they follow orders	Members actively involved: they contribute ideas and decide direction
Hierarchy controlled from top down	Hierarchy controlled from bottom up
Whoever has the most toys wins	Service, not wealth, is recognized

The power of cooperation is the true power of a union, and the power of the rank and file within a union. This is the power that can explore Mars, create a precision basketball team, or make kids happy at a holiday party. It is a power that is potentially equal to the largest fortunes and the most destructive weapons. It is also the power that transforms the people who use it.

This kind of power brings along with it a different set of personal values and ways that people organize themselves. It is not a new discovery. It has been a theme of solidarity unionism for more

than a century. Democracy and cooperative power go hand in hand. Unless many members do this work, the union can't succeed.

Reform and the Workplace

Again, the fundamental purpose of the union is power in the workplace. And since democracy and power are so intertwined, democracy also has to be rooted in the workplace; that's where it makes a difference.

Thus successful pro-democracy union reform efforts are essentially campaigns for workplace changes that the members need; if officials or bylaws get in the way, then they may need to be changed. For example a central organizing tool of Teamsters for a Democratic Union is to organize members for contract demands. (TDU started out as Teamsters for a Decent Contract.) TDU activists often become known as the people who can help with a grievance if the business agent is ignoring it.

When reformers take on workplace issues, officials may decide their methods are more effective and seek coalition with them. Or officials may try to protect their own positions at the expense of winning improvements from the company, thus revealing their own priorities. In any case, few members will work to change bylaws or elect new leaders unless they're convinced it will improve the way the union addresses their problems at work.

Thus, whether we're talking about the elected leaders of a statewide local considering how to make a stewards system work, or about a couple of coworkers at a kitchen table planning how to get a steward replaced, their success or failure in building democracy will be measured in power on the job.

Notes

1. Steven Greenhouse, "Judge Orders New Union Vote," *New York Times*, December 16, 1997; Steven Greenhouse, "Union Big Triumphs in Referendum over own Salary," *New York Times*, February 6, 1998; and Michael Hirsch, "Dissident Building Service Workers Win Supervision of By-Laws Vote," *Labor Notes*, February 1998, p. 5.
2. Dirk Johnson, "Hoffa on the March Again in Quest for Teamsters' Presidency," *New York Times*, September 4, 1997.