

Does "union democracy" undermine "solidarity?"

[We have asked labor activists to respond to "Card Check: Labor's Charlie Brown Moment?" by Robert Fitch, to encourage discussion on the important issues raised in the article. What follows is the response of Herman Benson.]

Whenever an intractable phenomenon resists explanation, curious systems are offered as answers. Humanity's mysterious place in the universe gives rise to some puzzling religions; the left's need to find a satisfactory place for the labor movement in society comes at one of those times. And so, Bob Fitch's provocative journey through history, philosophy, and janitors' wages should prompt a wide range of comment. In the course of all this, he seems to suggest what we might actually do, I'd like to summarize what seems to be the crux of what he proposes:

Because the labor movement, doing the same thing over and over again like Charlie Brown, he says, it has failed to live up to our expectations and is not reformable, we must work to create a new, what he calls, solidarity labor movement. By his standards it would appear, the left, aiming at labor reform, seems to be another Charlie Brown, futilely doing the same thing over and over; and so it needs to do something new. These two objectives are inextricably interlinked. The left, he seems to say, will rejuvenate itself only when, following his call for a new solidarity labor movement, it abandons the hope of changing this mortally defective labor movement and goes out to build that new solidarity movement.

Now, from his point of view, just what is the essential defect of what calls itself a labor movement today? It represents, he says, a minority that is interested only in itself; it is a special interest group that makes gains at the expense of the working class. Yes, he sometimes admits (but not always,)

there is a "union premium" but it is won by sacrificing the interests of the mass of workers. So far, he must realize, this is precisely the basic philosophical argument of extreme right wing apologists who insist that unionism itself is a parasitic growth upon society. Fitch expands the scope of that argument leftward. To that basic defect, he attributes all the other myriad ills: corruption, authoritarianism, decline of unionization under the impact of competition, and what not, adding that well-meaning progressives who enter the cesspool of that special-interest unionism, hoping to reform it, are bound to become corrupt themselves.

And so he wants a new labor movement that advances the broad interests of the class not the narrow, self-serving, special interest minority. The idea is not new; no question that it can be a seductive idea; it has been attractive enough to entice a whole cadre of left-leaning union activists, community organizers, and civil rights advocates to support the Andy Stern-Steve Lerner vision of a new labor movement. Calling for a union that strives for "Justice for All" and not "Justice for Us," they accuse Sal Rosselli of defending the "narrow " interests of his own members at the expense of those exploited workers on the outside.

A policy-program of action based upon a presumably profound conflict between the interests of the working class and the interests of its organized minority gets us nowhere. Unions organize first where workers are best situated to win their battle. As they raise the standards of those who are victorious, they tend to lift the standards of the class, even those not organized. The "union premium" surely means that unions will always face competitive danger from non-union employers and not always successfully. I don't quite understand how Fitch's solidarity unionism, even in theory, solves that problem. When a few hundred UE workers win severance pay by temporarily occupying a factory whose owners benefit from the bailout, that seems for him one example of the new solidarity unionism. If the SEIU wins a pay boost for several thousand New York janitors, that, we must presume, is

the old style bankrupt unionism in action. But in each case, where did the rest of the working class fit in? My guess is that he feels that the UE has contributed to creating "a national-popular will." Translate that into less mystical language: he likes the rhetoric, it's better propaganda. I don't want to denigrate rhetoric and propaganda. But is that the new way to a new labor movement? What else has the left been doing all these years? In general, Fitch faces reality with abstract rhetoric. He makes me think of an incident in Frank Schonfeld's early battle against racketeers in the Painters union in New York, A dozen of his caucus members were parceling out assignments in their election campaign. "You pass out handbills at the Local xx meeting; you at Local xxxx; you at the Bronx big job site; we all go to the pensioners meeting; etc etc." One advanced thinker got impatient, "We're wasting our time. What we have to do is organize the workers in struggle."

Workers join unions for higher wages, better conditions on the job, security.(A platitude? I think this simplistic truism belongs in this discussion of deep stuff!) Union leadership, in the name of noble objectives like "collective will formation" or solidarity unionism (or justice for all, or sweetheart deals with employers and politicians, or simple swindling), surely can downgrade these mundane pursuits. But in order to keep these "special interest" impulses under control, the leaders invent all kinds of bureaucratic and autocratic devices. That is, they undermine union democracy, which is precisely what explains the course of those well-meaning Stern zealots. And which is precisely where Fitch's theories would lead us, assuming anyone would try to implement them. Does that seem a stretch? Unfair? Think of where his convoluted thinking has led him:

Like the Stern ideologists, he derogates "union democracy.," (Watch those familiar demeaning quote marks." Here is one example of how he takes flight from reality into the world of abstraction where he is more comfortable. We, at the Association for Union Democracy for example, campaign for

certain specific rights for members in their unions to free speech, fair elections, due process, fair job referrals systems , etc. (How successful? We can argue about that.) He finds that "troubling" because all "union democracy" does is to give workers the opportunity of pursuing their own narrow interests as against the interests of the class. If you didn't get it from a quick reading of his piece, it's because he embellishes his notions with the dizzying trappings of philosophical speculation. He finds the advocacy of "union democracy" "troubling" because under that concept "the vital distinction between the mechanical and organic forms of solidarity disappears. And what's promoted is a kind of Smithian view of the labor movement in which the welfare of all is advanced by the democratic participatory strivings of members in each local union aiming strictly at its own welfare." Get it? Translate that into manageable English: Give rights to those narrow-minded workers, and they'll use it for their own selfish interests. Every condescending savior of the working class would agree. It's not a new idea. It is what propels the Stern-ideologists drive for a newly centralized, authoritarian labor movement which puts power into the hands of a know-it-all officialdom in the name of their version of solidarity.

Those who would help solve labor's problems by moving toward a highly centralized, authoritarian structure want to put an end to the rights of members in their locals. The Carpenters, for example, by turning locals into impotent administrative shells. The SEIU Sternites by merging locals into huge mega structures where it becomes extraordinarily difficult for any opposition independent of the establishment to take form.

Fitch's idealized brand of unionism leads him in precisely the same direction. Local autonomy does not fit in comfortably with his notion of solidarity. As he puts it – a leftist slant to an authoritarian idea – "Subdividing American labor into 20,000 semi-autonomous locals ... subdivides the possibility of solidarity. Each local has its own contract, its own local grievances –it remains a tidy, microcosm, self-sufficient to

itself."

Fitch, I am sure, believes all that stuff – in his head. But in his heart? I wonder, because I know he is a fine fellow. And so, let's submit him to a simple test: Fitch is about to enter a store only to confront an IWW picket line of workers who are on strike to demand a \$5 increase for seven Starbucks employees as part of the IWW eternal struggle to liberate workers of the world united. Will he respect that line? Of course! But let's say he meets a strike picket line brandishing labor banners protesting against the hiring of Muslims, would he respect that line? Of course not! These are workers fighting in their own narrow special interests. In the name of solidarity, he would never betray the cause of racial equality.

But let's say the picket line sought an increase in the wages of 100 members of one of those special-interest unions, one which he would replace because it seeks to gain at the expense of the working class. Would he respect it? I think he surely would, even though, according to his theory, he would seem to betray the requirements of class solidarity. Something must be wrong with his theory. Still, there is a seductive element of truth in everything he writes. As Walter Reuther would say – repeated over and over again by Victor – we can't be satisfied with a nickel-in-the-pay-envelope unionism. Those on the left – and dedicated activists, and intellectuals, and students – who direct their time and energies and emotions and sometimes their lives to unions, do so because they are convinced that the labor movement can serve as a transforming force for social justice. It can be frustrating to see how far short unions can fall from that end, and it can be disappointing to see them preoccupied with the "narrow" interests of their own members and deaf to leftist appeals for broader solidarity.

But we must remember this: Because unions arise out of the basic need of its worker-members for higher wages, security, better working conditions, the labor movement – even as a minority of the working class – acquires a stability, a long-range endurance, a continuity that distinguishes it from other

social movements and from the multitude of charities and worthy causes that hope to serve ailing humanity. The left builds upon that quality of endurance; it is that quality that makes the union movement so powerful a potential force for social justice. But Fitch bases his philosophy upon the presumed antagonism between the simple drive of one group of workers to better its lot and the needs of his solidarity unionism.

The evils of corruption, and authoritarianism, and the dangers to democracy in the labor movement do not arise out of the lack of class struggle policies or, as Fitch might put it, from a shortage of solidarity. These problems transcend social and political line. All those class struggle unions he so nostalgically admires, those created in the thirties by the radical founding fathers, seem to have evolved into the kind of unionism he rejects. If we could start all over again in perfect virtue, what reason to believe that we would end anywhere else?

Full disclosure: Here, briefly, is what I believe. The labor movement today, with all the defects that Bob catalogues once again, falls far short of what we want. But I believe it has been inching slowly, painfully, inconsistently, in the right direction. In large part that movement has been impelled by the work of union democrats, leftists, and dissidents –like TDU, Labor Notes, and reform caucuses that come and go – with the help of federal law on union democracy. I mention this with some diffidence only because it may provide Bob, in his rebuttals, with the opportunity to tell us again at length how degenerated he finds the labor movement and how far it falls short of his ideal, maybe even worse than ever. But, Bob, you have succeeded in convincing us of the evils that exist. You insist that what we are doing do is futile. Enough of that. Now tell us how you propose that the reoriented left is build the new labor movement and how it is to create the constituency in and around the labor movement, as it exists, to campaign for the new labor movement, one that exists now only in your heart's desire.

There is a real problem in the labor movement today. We do need strong national unions armed with the authority and power to deal with centralized capital. Using that need as a pretext, one dangerous tendency in the labor movement would seek that power by turning locals into impotent administrative shells. Another would transform locals into uncontrollable monstrosities. The requirement for central authority in unions (aka, solidarity) must be mitigated by a vigorous union democracy. Just at a time when union activists on the left – and right and center – must emphasize union democracy as a means of strengthening union power, Fitch, in the name of solidarity, derogates "union democracy" and the efforts of those who campaign for it.

To sum up again what seems his program for reviving the left: Replace what he sees as a degenerated labor movement, a special-interest institution that promotes the narrow privileges of its members at the expense of the working class, by creating a new labor movement which represents the whole class. Toward that end, he would work for the end of maintenance of membership requirements and for an end to exclusive bargaining rights. As a platform, it is a left wing recipe for suicide; but it does have one redeeming feature: no one will have to suffer the consequences because it will never happen. We all may talk about it, but no one will ever do it. The downside is that the consolation of talking may relieve us of the burden of doing anything.