

Fitch, Benson, and Early

September 13, 2010

I read with keen interest 2 recent articles on the New Politics website: "Card Check: Labor's Charlie Brown Moment?" by Robert Fitch, and "Does 'Union Democracy' Undermine 'Solidarity?'" by Herman Benson.

I consider myself a life-long socialist activist, since high school, anyway. I'm retired now, but for the last 15 years that I worked, as a Respiratory Therapist, I participated in the Labor Party and wound up organizing the bargaining unit I worked in at Children's Hospital in Seattle.

I really agree with the sentiment expressed by both Bob and Herman, that Labor should be the fundamental building block for a movement to make America a progressive and decent society. I also agree with both of them, that the shrinkage of labor in the U.S. is a very bad thing. Getting so much smaller makes it harder and harder for Labor to play its progressive role, not to mention its role of protecting members' interests on the job.

Herman and Bob differ pretty strongly on the whys and what-to-do's regarding the pickle unions find themselves in. After quite a bit of reflection, I find myself in more agreement with Benson than Fitch, but I want to emphasize how much respect I have for both of these two friends of Labor. The two articles are well written, and rich in ideas. I hope that they are widely read and studied by all who care about the strength and vitality of unions in America.

I read Fitch's book, *Solidarity for Sale*, a couple of years ago. I liked it a lot. It was a real breath of fresh air, and it was most enlightening about the problem of union corruption, which was always in the back of my mind while I was organizing at Children's. Corruption is a scary thing for unorganized workers who are trying to decide whether or not to support a union. A friend of mine in the Labor Party told me one night at a meeting, that a president of the local we were working with had been found dead in a bath tub full of blood a few years back. Like I said, scary.

I find Fitch's ideas about dues check-off and exclusive bargaining rights interesting. The way I see it, Fitch would like to see American unions more like those in France, where dues are voluntary and workers can join any union that they want to. However, I agree with Benson, that taking up these exact positions would be suicidal for the left. Unions here have operated with exclusive bargaining and mandatory dues for a very long time, and a total change toward the French style would throw things into chaos and weaken unions in the U.S., when they're already pretty far down.

But we might want to take a look at dues check-off. Maybe we could make only a small portion mandatory, to be collected by the boss. 15 or 20 bucks a month could be subject to check-off, with another 20 or so collected by stewards. Asking people for money at work would be a great way to encourage communication among union members, and folks wouldn't feel so boxed in.

I totally agree with Benson, that union democracy is of paramount importance. Unless we have real democracy in unions, workers are not going to want to become members. I believe that having manageable-sized locals is an important part of union democracy. If the locals are too big, or national, nobody will ever be able to run for an important office by talking it up at work, and maybe organizing a committee for him/herself in the town where she or he lives. The crazy things we hear out of SEIU these days, about democracy not being as important as adding new members, should stop. Democracy is our lifeblood, and yes, Herman, it doesn't belong inside ironic quotation marks.

One of the things I love about democracy is how it encourages members to participate in their unions. The more labor takes on a non-professional face, the more comfortable everyday people will be with joining up. The most powerful words an organizer can say are, "I love the union, and I'm not getting paid to say that." Professional organizers, important as they are, can't say that. Unions that have a lot of member participation are going to be the most successful in the coming years, like the National Union of Health Care Workers (NUHW), in California.

Another way of encouraging member participation, that's a favorite of mine, is something called Stewards' Councils. I've written about this idea in the past, on MRZine. The idea behind stewards' councils is that you bring together elected rank and file leaders in a union local, or international, so they can have a voice, in the union, and to unorganized workers. I would like to see stewards' council leaders have columns in local newsletters and the national labor press. I think that members would like to know what rank and file leaders think, not just paid leaders and staff, the way it is now.

There is a recent article on the role of stewards in NUHW and elsewhere, on the MRZine website, by Steve Early. The Early piece reveals the power of the organized stewards in NUHW, which is allowing them to challenge the far richer SEIU this month at Kaiser, in what he calls the "the most important labor election in 70 years." At stake in this election are Kaiser's 44,000 SEIU members, and it looks like NUHW has a good chance to win, thanks to the support of the organized, volunteer stewards at Kaiser.

What can the left do to help? We can help stewards' councils get started throughout the Labor Movement. A national meeting could be held where stewards from unions across the country were invited to come and discuss the possibility of forming a National Stewards' Council (NSC). The NSC could then take up the task of helping stewards' councils get up and running throughout the Labor Movement. I bet there would be some interest in such an undertaking, from the NUHW stewards.

It's all a package, really:

- Stand up for real union democracy.
- Rely on support from the rank and file.
- Make dues as low and voluntary as possible.
- Organize the stewards, to make the unions more like their members. This will greatly help with organizing new members and help the Labor Movement become an even stronger progressive force in American politics.