Herman Benson (1915-2020): No Socialism Without Democracy

written by Daniel Randall | July 17, 2020

Herman Benson, veteran socialist activist and fighter for rank-and-file democracy in the labour movement, died on 2 July, aged 104.

Herman was the second-to-last survivor, at least to my knowledge, of the "first generation" of "third camp" socialists – the Trotskyists who, in the late 1930s, had broken with the orthodoxy that the Soviet Union still represented some kind of "workers' state", worthy of defence, and founded the political tradition summarised by the slogan "Neither Washington nor Moscow, but international socialism", and which, since the mid-1980s, Workers' Liberty has increasingly come to identify.

Along with Max Shachtman, Hal Draper, and others, Herman founded the Workers Party (later the Independent Socialist League, ISL), working for it as an organiser in New York and Detroit, and as an editor of its paper, *Labor Action*. He was the Workers Party candidate in Detroit's mayoral election in 1947, and he had experience of shop-floor class struggle, working as a skilled toolmaker.

Like many former Workers Party/ISL leaders, Herman moved away from explicitly revolutionary socialism, and the project of building a Marxist party. But unlike some, he never abandoned the class struggle and the cause of socialism, dedicating himself to fighting for rank-and-file democracy in the trade union movement.

Working with Clyde Summers, a professor of law at Yale University, Herman helped secure the passing of the Labor Management Reporting and Disclosure Act in 1959, legislation which protected rank-and-file union members' rights to free speech, voting rights, and civil liberties within their unions. This was a labour movement led not merely by inept or conservative bureaucrats, but often by profoundly corrupt officials, sometimes backed up by or directly involved in organised crime.

Herman founded the newsletter *Union Democracy in Action*, and later the Association for Union Democracy (AUD), to support rank-and-file reform efforts inside trade unions, lending vital support to campaigns inside numerous unions, perhaps most famously the United Mine Workers, in the wake of the assassination of pro-reform official Joseph Yablonski; and the International Brotherhood of Teamsters, where the Teamsters for a Democratic Union network took on corruption and organised crime. AUD is still active, and publishes the *Union Democracy Review*.

Although I was born and brought up in Britain, I have American citizenship via an American mother, and regular visits to the USA mean I maintain some connections on the US left. Since becoming a railway worker and trade union rep, I have often looked to what might be called the "rank-and-

fileist" milieu in the US labour movement, including the AUD and *Labor Notes*, also founded by socialists emerging from the third camp tradition, for inspiration and education. The fundamental political lesson of Herman's long years of service to the cause of union democracy is that the trade union movement is a terrain of struggle, and that if we, rank-and-file workers, want our unions to be fit for the purpose of fighting the class struggle, we must be prepared to organise insurgent, oppositional, transformational struggles within them.

My first direct contact with Herman was in 2012, when I edited a symposium of testimonies and recollections of activists who'd be involved with the WP/ISL tradition and its offshoots and successors on the US left. Herman's contribution was a sober account of the origins of the tendency and why, in his view, it had failed to hold its shape a distinct political tradition. I later interviewed him about the second volume of *The Fate of the Russian Revolution*, a book series published by Alliance for Workers' Liberty (AWL) anthologising what we have called "the lost texts of critical Marxism", the attempts by the "heterodox" Trotskyists, and some of the "orthodox", to come to terms with the political and ideological implications of Stalinism. Herman was the only writer whose work was included in the anthology to be still living. In our interview, he said, "reading it at 100, it activates the juices of a 24-year old zealot."

I had the honour of meeting Herman in 2016, in his New York apartment. I remember him expressing his surprise – pleasant, I think – that we had published the *Fate* books. I must have appeared to him as a kind of ideological archaeologist, attempting to excavate a semi-submerged political tradition and put it to use. I was fascinated to hear his stories of organising Workers Party branches in New York and Detroit, and the party's industrial and union activity, which he remembered with astonishing clarity for a centenarian.

I cannot say, on the basis of our occasional correspondence and one meeting, that I *knew* Herman, but from my contact with him, and what I know of his work, it seems to me there is a clear, consistent foundation to his political life, which connects his earlier work as a founder of the heteredox-Trotskyist, third camp tradition and his 60-plus years of dedicated struggle for union democracy: the idea that, without democracy, there can be no socialism.

Herman understood that neither an authoritarian state controlled by "Communist" bureaucrats, nor bureaucratic trade unions controlled by corrupt officials, could ever be instruments for the advancement of workers' rights, still less the socialist transformation of society. The struggle for democracy as an irreplaceable element of the socialist project was foundational for Marx and Engels – democracy not as a technocratic or administrative procedure, but a process of empowerment and instrument of self-emancipation. Both statist reformism and, even more barbarically and grotesquely, Stalinism, have ripped radical democracy out of its rightful place in the endeavour of socialism, in what it means to be a socialist. Herman's whole political life can be seen as an attempt to restore it to its central position. He saw a rediscovery of the debates recounted in the *Fate* books as a contribution to that, writing that "those discussions restore the defence of democracy in society as a central theme not only for socialists but for all who seek social justice."

And as he wrote in his review of volume two of *Fate* for *New Politics*: "Heterodox Trotskyists emphasized the need for democratic control over nationalized property. From there to the explicit goal of democratic control over productive property—national, social, or private—is no giant ideological leap. As I see it now, the lesson is that no form of property guarantees social justice; the key to social justice lies in the control of the state, that is, in the battle of democracy. Such is the inseparable link between socialism and democracy."

It was an honour to fight alongside Herman in "the battle of democracy", albeit for a relatively short time in the context of his long political life, and even though our primary theatres of combat were

separated by an ocean. I was deeply honoured and proud, as I know many other comrades were, when Herman sent greetings to the Workers' Liberty AGM in 2016, writing: "In the great cause of socialism, you emphasise the need to defend democracy. Keep up that good work."

The fundamental ideas he fought for are as urgent now as they ever were. There are those on left who defend and cheerlead for China, Russia, Iran, Cuba, or other authoritarian states or movements claiming some form of opposition to the global hegemon; and there those in our movement content to let our unions stagnate into passive service-providers run by inert bureaucracies (sometimes staffed, perhaps not coincidentally, by apologists for the Chinese and Cuban states). Against these approaches, the principles that animated and shaped Herman Benson's political life can help provide what he called "an antidote to Stalinist thinking", and reorient and refound a consistently-democratic, working-class socialism that can allow us to remake our movement in order that, through it, we can remake society.

Daniel Randall and Herman Benson, New York, 2016

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