Does Buhle Ask Union Democracy to Save the World?

written by Herman Benson | April 3, 2010

IT IS DIFFICULT TO KNOW just what Paul Buhle is driving at; it's even more difficult to figure out what relevance his remarks have to what I wrote in *New Politics* about the undemocratic leanings of the New Unity Partnership. As best as I can make out, what he intends to say is this: Because the advocates of the New Unity Partnership seem to be fine people, and because they are zealous about organizing the unorganized, and because they may harbor views on American foreign policy akin to his own, they should be immune from criticism even though they seem convinced that union democracy is an impediment to organizing and even though they think it necessary to reorganize the labor movement in an authoritarian straightjacket to achieve their worthy ends. In any event, if he feels that my comments that follow here are off base, it is simply that I have trouble reading him in any other way.

For the benefit of those who have surely forgotten what I wrote in *New Politics*, or never read it, let me sum up very briefly what I said in the previous issue.

The leaders of five unions [now down to four through merger] joined together into a caucus called the New Unity Partnership. One of their aims is to force John Sweeney out of office as AFL-CIO president. Sweeney, they argue, has failed to deliver on his promise to organize the unorganized. Since, they insist, the labor movement must organize or die, they intend to put vast resources into the job and they propose to reorganize the whole AFL-CIO toward the same goal. A cadre of idealistic young organizers has been enlisted in the cause.

Organizing the unorganized, the classical goal perennially proclaimed, is truly more urgent now than ever. Every supporter of the labor movement should be gratified to see the banner raised again for immediate action; they will be encouraged when more than words, when real money and manpower are devoted to it; they will wish for every success and join in trying to achieve it. We could only applaud if only that was involved. But it is not. The trouble is that the ideologists of the New Unity Partnership see union democracy as an annoying obstacle to their aims. They insist that in order to organize, it is essential to further bureaucratize the labor movement. They would intensify every tendency toward authoritarianism that already exists in the labor movement; and they would undermine the counter tendencies toward union democracy.

In this, the basic philosophy of the New Unity Partnership is self-defeating. If the organized labor movement is to make the massive breakthrough that it requires, there must be a change in the balance of social and political power in America. A labor movement that is presented to the public as an organization in the bureaucratic grip of an authoritarian officialdom, however well-meaning, can hardly serve that aim. A labor movement that can come forward itself as a democratic grassroots movement of free people has the potential to help move the country in the direction of social justice. In a few words: Union democracy means a stronger labor movement.

All this is abstract. What does the NUP look like in practice?

Some of the NUP program is purely hypothetical and would take years — if ever — to effect; but its very presentation reveals the state of mind of is proponents. They would eliminate the autonomy of city and state AFL-CIO federations by giving the international unions the power of appointing all

representatives and ending election by locals. They don't want unions to represent a disparate membership: no more nurses in an operating engineers union; no more court clerks with longshoremen. Their remedy is to dissolve, merge, and redirect unions — especially smaller ones — into a few massive centralized unions with closely defined jurisdiction by industry. No more competition over members; strict guarantees against raiding.

But to begin with, these physicians would have to heal themselves. The Service Employees, a big NUP power, is itself a huge disparate federation; it organizes janitors, federal and local government employees, doctors, scientists. The Laborers union, another NUP affiliate, takes in a mint of money by organizing U.S. Postal employees.

But all this is music of the future. Meanwhile, the NUP has demonstrated in grim reality what its vision of a new labor movement would look like. The Carpenters union has already reconstructed itself in the new mold. This union is the most aggressive of the NUP combine; it has already done what the others only threaten: it has disaffiliated from the AFL-CIO. The Carpenters union reveals the NUP, no longer in theory, but in practice.

All locals of the Carpenters union are now combined into regional councils that take in many locals and cover geographical areas so large that members of one local never meet members of another. The locals themselves have no role in collective bargaining; they are more like social clubs because all collective bargaining is controlled by the region. Locals are not permitted to pay any of their local officers; they may not hire any staff except clerical help. Locals are deprived of the main source of construction income, the hourly work tax, which goes to the region. All business agents are appointed by the region; all grievances handled there. The top regional officer, the Executive Secretary Treasurer [EST], is armed with total power. No person can hold any paid staff position, local or regional, and not even any paid regional clerical position, without the approval of the EST. It is true that the Executive Secretary Treasurer is elected by delegates from the locals. But, since every delegate, like every member, is dependent upon the EST for a paid union staff job, it is obvious who controls whom.

It is true that an effective organizing program probably does need a certain measure of tightening up, a degree of central authority. But here, the NUP is utilizing that need as the occasion, or as the pretext, for eviscerating the union's democracy. Precisely because some element of centralization is necessary, all the offsetting rights of democracy must be preserved: the right to elect officers, the right of these officers to play a meaningful role in union affairs, the ability in practice to run for office, the right to vote on contracts, the right to elect business agents, and more.

When the NUP calls for a vigorous program of organizing, it is on solid ground; when it proposes a deeper bureaucratization of the labor movement, it goes off the edge.

Paul deals with hardly a word of all this (and I say "hardly" just to be on the safe side.) He ignores the NUP's vision of a bureaucratized labor movement. He is really engaged in a totally different, only distantly related, unfocused, discussion. Disappointed at the sorry state of the world, and for lack of anything else, Paul looks to the NUP for reassurance that better days are coming.

And so Paul diverts the discussion irrelevantly into his own favorite subject: his literary factional campaign against Samuel Gompers, George Meany, Lane Kirkland, Al Shanker and others identified as "labor fakirs" by Daniel DeLeon. Nothing wrong with discussing some other subject as long as we remember what we are talking about.

(Here an odd question pops into mind. Paul is so harsh in his treatment of dead "labor fakirs," how come he is so sympathetically gentle toward the living leaders of the NUP? In looking for an

answer to that question, we get some idea of what's bothering him and of his need for someone, or something, with real power to look up to for assurance.)

Like any decent-minded radical of the left, Paul would like to have, and to have had, a labor movement that resists the idea that "The U.S. military and the U.S. economy must and will dominate the planet." Some of the current NUP leaders have a reputation as good progressives; there is even a rumor that they may privately share Paul's anti-imperialist leanings, although these reputed sympathies have no practical expression and make no impact on political life. On the other hand, Douglas McCarron, Carpenters president and a pillar of the NUP, has flirted on-and-off with President Bush and at one point the NUP was seeking out ties with Bush's Republican Party. Good or bad as a practical device to facilitate organizing, these tactics hardly flow from an anti-imperialist fervor. Paul is under an illusion, but he seems grateful enough even for that illusory hope to receive the NUP as an ally in his anti-imperialist campaign against Gompers and company. That explains why he is so uneasy over my discussion of the NUP. Apparently, he wants to shield it against criticism, even criticism from the standpoint of union democracy.

IN ONE RESPECT his enthusiasm for his new allies is preposterous. He touts the merger of HERE and UNITE as an admirable sign of great things to come. But what is it really? For one thing, it is a merger that violates the holy principles enunciated by the NUP itself that calls for the end of mixed unions of disparate memberships and their replacement by a few unions with clearly defined jurisdiction. Clothing was forced to take refuge in a forced marriage with Hotel. UNITE was an independent union which had virtually ceased to exist in its assigned industry. The HERE-UNITE merger joined together a dying union endowed with a staff and money with a union with actual members. It was probably indicated as a practical measure for them to merge. But as an expression of some grand new principle or as a sign of a new road to labor salvation it is an absurdity.

At one point, Paul even allows the NUP contempt for democracy to infect his own mood. "An all-white (and all- male) building trades local in a Southern city," he writes, "is not ‘democratic' even if all its members should vote night and day." And therefore what?" Abolish the right to vote? Does that depressing fact justify the action of the NUP's Carpenters union in depriving union members of the right to elect their regional officers? What *is* the point of those derogatory quotes around ‘democratic.'

Paul's state of mind cannot evaluate movements for union democracy apart from the battle against American imperialism. Here is how he understands why the Association for Union Democracy, under Benson's tutelage, fell short of his exacting standards: ". . . His [Benson's] suspicions of SEIU and UNITE/HERE," he writes, "have at least some of their origins in an old quarrel with the New Left and the antiwar movement." Actually he has it wrong, all wrong, upside down in fact.

I had no particular quarrel with the New Left or antiwar movements. They had no interest in union democracy and little in labor, while I was preoccupied with the subject. My quarrel, from the very beginning, was with the supporters of George Meany, especially those social democrats who were ready to sacrifice union democracy in the interests of their ideology.

These partisans of the labor establishment were upset because demands for union democracy were directed against the Meany-Kirkland combination. (Gompers was no longer around.) When AUD wrote in favor of the miners' movement against the murderous Tony Boyle, the social democratic *New America* ascribed the killing of Jock Yablonski to violence-bound traditions in the mining industry, as though sociology was the assassin. When AUD supported the right of

Steelworkers to honest elections, *New America* whitewashed the union. AUD was denounced for backing "counter-culturists" against mainstream labor. Why? Most of our critics were good people, well-meaning, ordinarily defenders of fair play in society. But their political line made them leery of demands for fair play in unions. Paul, I know, detests them and all they stand for. But their kind of disquiet over the "limitations" of union democracy resembles his in methodology: Different politics but a similar downgrading of union democracy.

It seems that Buhle would impose a heavy political burden on movements for union democracy. I say "seems" because the relevance of any one statement to any other in his comments is never clear. We must speculate. "The issues of union democracy," he writes at one point, "can never be, and certainly have never been, separate from larger perspectives on race and gender, not only nationally but globally." And two paragraphs later, presumably with some connection, he chides the Gomperses and Shankers who, he insists, maintain that "The U.S. military and the U.S. economy must and will dominate the planet..." And he decries the cold war and "criminal involvement in human rights abuses by labor officials … in regard to Venezuela."

Must a union democracy movement be expected to try to correct all that? If such is not the demand that he is making upon any union democracy movement, what is he talking about? Not one of the major union democracy movements that fought so hard to freshen up our labor movement in the last 50 years could meet his criteria. Not the painters, not the miners, not the steelworkers. If the reform movement in the Teamsters union, in the 34 years of its existence, has ever centered its efforts around his radical demands, I must have overlooked it.

In sum: Buhle's sets radical political standards, so like his own, for any union democracy movement. But he makes no union democracy demands upon those who he only thinks — or hopes — share his political views. From the NUP, he seems satisfied with the wisp of a rumor. They don't even oblige with a ringing resolution. Two of the NUP powerhouses, Carpenters and Laborers, can hardly be taken seriously as candidates to lead the war for freedom in the world.

But why heap so heavy a load on our embattled union democrats? We don't place that kind of burden on other social movements with important, though limited, aims. We don't demand that environmentalists, gay rights activists, right-to-choose advocates, civil libertarians, defenders of social security and universal health care, etc., fight to free the world from the evils of American imperialism. Each in its own corner campaigns for fair play. None by itself has to take on the burden of saving the world, but taken together they are the hope for a world of social justice.

However, there is one crucial difference between all these other causes, on the one hand, and movements for union democracy, on the other. Only the partisans of union democracy are ever sharply pitted against union leaders. By its very nature the quest for union democracy comes into conflict with union officials, not only with "labor fakirs," whom Paul detests, but with progressives, whom he may admire or view as political allies. Perhaps this is the key to Paul's misgivings and explains how everything he writes on the NUP fits together. And so, let us pose a question: If labor leaders express their sympathy for all the required radical views — or seem to! — do they gain immunity from the demands of union democracy?

In a way, this discussion poses a test for the democratic labor left. Its distinguishing mark has been its insistence that in the battle for social justice we depend upon the power of the people below not upon any bureaucracy, however well-meaning, above. Along comes a group of union leaders who, in essence, say: get the workers off our backs and give us the power to make the decisions, and we will find a way to save the labor movement. Some of them — but not all! — may, from time to time, accompany their claims with reassuring declarations of their radical sympathies. Are those reassurances enough to induce the democratic labor left to suspend its own most basic principles?

A lesson of the past 80 years is that the problems of bureaucracy and workers' rights, in unions, in society, and even in a putative workers state transcend ideology and political line. Paul Buhle admires *New Politics* because it "will not yield an inch to bureaucracy." In delving into the annals of the past, as a respected radical historian, Paul sees the roots of the problem clearly. Now the point is to recognize it right in front of our eyes.

Footnotes