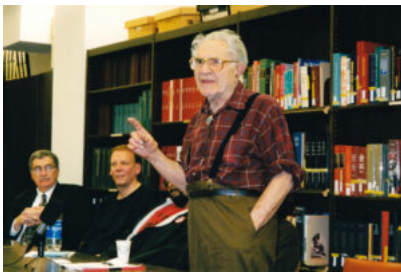
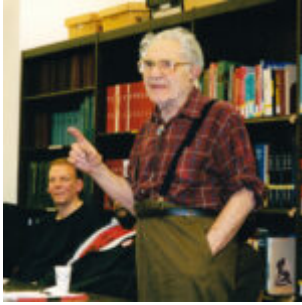


Unions, Democracy, and the Third Camp

January 30, 2021



The decline of labor has been accompanied by an opportunity we have not seen in decades. A new generation of socialists, many of them members of Democratic Socialists of America, are enthusiastically discussing the role of the working class and unions in the fight for socialism. Making the best use of this development requires critically analyzing the past several decades of struggle among labor leftists about how a commitment to socialism “from below” might inform our union activity. In this article I try to frame and spur that debate by comparing the perspective of Herman Benson with material published by other contributors to *New Politics*, founded by Benson’s contemporaries Phyllis and Julius Jacobson.

When Herman Benson died last summer, a *New York Times* obituary captured his accomplishments and political history with, for the *Times*, remarkable political accuracy. It noted Benson’s role as a prominent defender of union democracy and the roots of his political ideals in the Workers Party (WP) and later the Independent Socialist League (ISL), which opposed both capitalism and Stalinism, breaking with Trotsky and the Trotskyists over whether the Soviet Union was a society that deserved the political support of socialists.¹

Yet for all it got right, the obituary and accolades to Benson’s impressive contributions missed a contradiction in his legacy: how his singular focus on democratizing the unions undercut what he defined as the ultimate aim of his project, revitalizing the labor movement and in doing so defending democracy in society. Benson mentored student activists from the 1960s and 70s who identified with the independent socialist tradition, a political milieu that informed his embrace of union democracy. For the WP and ISL, the struggle for union democracy was essential as a good in itself because it improves workers’ lives and because it educates the working class about ideals needed to emancipate all of humanity from economic, political, and social oppression. Union democracy is indispensable in the fight for democracy and socialism from below.²

It’s fair to say Benson became the best-known advocate of union democracy in left labor circles because of his passionate and informed support of dissidents’ struggles and his longevity in that support. He provided young activists—student radicals inspired to undertake a “turn to the working class” based on ideas articulated in “Toward the Working Class” by Kim Moody, Fred Eppstener, and Mike Flug and in Hal Draper’s “Why the Working Class?”—with the rich knowledge of the labor movement Benson had acquired in his own years as a worker, supporting them as they undertook the daunting task of democratizing the unions to which Marxists had traditionally oriented. The shift

from activity in the student movement toward “industrialization” adhered to the traditional Marxist definition of the working class: “into the factories and unions.”³ Benson’s tutelage, and support from the Association for Union Democracy, which he founded and led, were invaluable to union activists who could find help nowhere else in their struggles to make their unions respect the most basic tenets of democracy.

His contributions were remarkable and worthy of more respect and attention than they received during his life, a fact due in good part to the proclivity of many radicals and liberals to consider fights for democracy within unions as somehow anti-union. In reality, as Benson argued so forcefully and well, the absence of basic democratic rights for union members weakened the labor movement; the “bad press” unions received because dissidents fought for the right to fair elections, contract votes, and freedom to expose and oust corrupt officials was no news to union members, already alienated from the organizations that took their dues and failed to heed their voices.⁴ However, I think another factor in Benson’s not receiving his due was his insistence that the project of union democracy had to be isolated from left politics. He equated radicals’ insistence that union revitalization went hand and in hand with labor supporting demands for social justice with ideas that he had rejected about the revolutionary potential of the working class. As he put it, “If the working class refuses to dedicate itself to the Marxist ambition, it still pursues its own. Workers’ organizations may not have taken revolutionary power, but they have almost everywhere and always been one of the chief social forces in defense of democracy in society. You may impose on your daughter the mission of becoming the president of the United States, but it is no failure if she ‘only’ becomes a good doctor.”⁵

Union democracy, for Benson, was about “free speech, fair elections, due process, fair job referrals systems, etc.,” what I would characterize as the formal, procedural protections—often denied or violated—essential for members to have voice in and control over the organizations that represent them. My experience as a union activist committed to democracy and my further work in helping reformers in teachers unions have persuaded me that democratic rights in unions depend on policies consciously crafted and carried out to encourage the idea that members “own” the union and exercise that ownership through their involvement. Such policies restrain the power of staff and officers through bottom-up control and a culture of respectful debate and criticism. A caucus, as I discuss below, is also necessary much of the time to maintain the procedures and culture that underlie the union’s democratic functioning.

Benson’s view of the working class and the implications for the fight for union democracy were reshaped when he reexamined the WP and ISL break with Trotskyism. He concluded that the test of whether a society is a workers state—who owns the property—and the concomitant belief that democratic control over productive property would insure social justice, were wrong: “No change in the form of property ownership will erase the conflict among contending social groups. As far as we can see, the need will continue to defend people below from the administrators, bureaucrats, and privileged strata above. From that standpoint, the test is not property forms but democracy, which provides the means of that defense.” Thus 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.”⁶

In Benson’s schema, the fight for union democracy is a struggle that by itself can transform the society through the vast cadre of union members “imbued with the conviction that their unions truly belonged to them and not to the salaried officialdom.” They would be a political “army of millions of missionaries who would speak up for unions and labor’s cause to their relatives, their friends, co-workers—at home, in social gatherings, in their churches and clubs, at work. And so, in time, the mood of the nation could be affected and the labor movement restored to a powerful social and political force.” His belief in the singular, solitary power of union democracy excluded union

reformers offering cures for “the many social and economic ills of the nation or of the labor movement.” In many exchanges with radicals, Benson dismissed the need for radical changes that he saw denigrating the centrality of the fight for union democracy, though he conceded in one debate, “In some respects, we have a better labor movement. The entry of nurses, teachers, communication workers, and public employees has made a difference. The labor movement is more sensitive to the concerns of minorities and immigrants.”⁷ Missing was an explanation of why the labor movement had become “more sensitive” to social oppression or why this was a positive development.

Accompanying Benson’s rejection of the revolutionary potential of the working class was his dismissal of the idea of the Third Camp, which he described as a slogan designed to make as “thought-provoking as possible our opposition to what we denounced as the two warring imperialist camps. But it took on double significance. It made clear, in the context of world war [World War II], our clear opposition to the two rival social systems: capitalism versus the new social order of bureaucratic collectivism as represented by the Soviet Union under Stalin.” Like so many of his generation, experiencing dashed hopes and expectations of working-class revolution led to jettisoning consistent opposition to both capitalism and communism, that is, the notion of the Third Camp, which Benson described as “less a program of action and more a kind of mystical consolation for its adherents, a reassurance that somehow, somewhere, out there is a powerful social force that will turn our ideals of a just, democratic, peaceful society from a dream into a reality.”⁸

New Politics: A Contrasting View of Union Democracy and Socialism

Benson’s certitude about key issues in the struggle for union democracy, embrace of using the courts, and eschewing calls for unions to adopt the demands of social movements for equality, social justice, and peace, were not shared by all his former comrades in the WP and ISL whose work was published in *New Politics* (NP). For Benson as well as his critics from the left, the centrality of union democracy was a given. As Burton Hall wrote in NP in Fall, 1964, “Should unions be democratic? The question seems almost pointless. Unionism, after all is a struggle for democracy, a struggle to democratize the industrial regime. It is nothing if it is not democratic.”⁹ Union dissent was an important enough concern that the Jacobsons helped publish *Autocracy and Insurgency in Organized Labor*, edited by Burton Hall, with Transaction Books. (The other collection they published was edited by Julius Jacobson about the Soviet Union and the socialist vision.) Because the Jacobsons conceived of NP as a space for pointed debate and controversy, as Phyllis noted in a 1983 speech hosted by Tamiment Library, the journal always invited responses from the union leaders its writers criticized. On the other hand, the Association for Union Democracy newsletter, the *Union Democracy Review* (UDR), which Benson edited, was devoted to advocacy and seldom allowed officials to respond to critiques. When I submitted a letter to UDR critical of violations of democracy in the United Federation of Teachers (UFT) because Benson had commended it as a model of democracy (issue #36), Benson at first rejected my piece, explaining AUD took up much more serious breaches of democracy, like murder of dissidents in gangster unions. I appealed to Benson, noting the double standard to which he held white collar unions; union officials victimizing opponents by colluding with the employer to fire them was no minor problem. Benson published the piece—with a response from UFT President Albert Shanker, which I think may have been the only time a union official had the opportunity for a rejoinder in UDR. Decades later Benson described the longtime political connections that had led to Shanker and the UFT being considered an AUD ally.¹⁰

Burton Hall’s defense of union democracy sketched a far more critical and nuanced view of using the courts than Benson advocated. In the Fall 1964 issue of NP, Hall concluded the “closer ‘growing together’ of the unions and the state power” had weakened the fight for rank and file control of their unions. In his Summer 1968 article, “Labor Insurgency and the Legal Trap,” Hall examined the numerous legal barriers to rank and file control. Hall proposed as an alternative direct action, “the

classic instance being the series of post-World War II wildcat strikes in the East Coast longshore industry.”

What gave that revolt its peculiarly effective character was the fact that the rebelling longshore [workers], rather than demanding that employers bargain with their rank and file organization, demanded instead that their corrupt union leadership renegotiate with the employers the terms of the collective bargaining agreements. It would seem that direct action of that kind, addressing its demands to union leadership and the employers jointly, is the approach which—when coupled with the parallel exercise of whatever legal and administrative procedures are available to the rebellious workers—comprises the rank and file strategy best suited to cope with the facts of bureaucratic labor relations. (38)

Hall’s articles pre-dated debates in the independent socialist movement among my generation about whether and how to use the bourgeois courts in union struggles. Unfortunately, the reexamination of direct action and reliance on the courts he attempted to initiate didn’t occur. While it may have been that Benson’s strategy, which was accepted by activists who created *Labor Notes* and Teamsters for a Democratic Union, was right, discussion about the complexity of what was lost and what was gained in using the courts didn’t occur. This was to the detriment of our understanding of the role of socialists in unions. As the “red state” walkouts of teachers in 2018 suggest, direct action, organized independently of unions and government regulations that establish collective bargaining, deserve the more serious attention Hall proposed.¹¹

An exchange between Hall and Benson about democracy in the Painters Union in the 1973 Spring and Winter issues of *NP*, marred for this reader by polemics that cross the border to vituperation, raises questions that have been denied the serious scrutiny they deserve: Under what conditions should union reformers attempting to democratize their unions assume leadership? What is the role of the caucus once union reformers are elected? Burton Hall’s original article cast Ralph Schonfeld, who had run on a program of democratizing the union, as having betrayed the cause, colluding with employers and retreating from pledges to end the practice of business agents appointing shop stewards. Benson, who had assisted Schonfeld in his election and in his role as president, responded in the next issue, as did Schonfeld, with Hall replying to both. Space limitations prohibit me from summarizing this rich debate, but Hall’s arguments are stunningly relevant in current efforts to reform teachers unions and perhaps others as well. First, Schonfeld was elected without a majority on the executive committee and in opposition to the international union. Hence he faced considerable opposition in carrying out the reform program on which he had been elected with the support of a caucus. Hall concluded Schonfeld had made a compromise fatal to energizing the rank and file when he backed off from refusing to allow business agents to appoint shop stewards.

Hall maintained rank and file control had been undercut by Schonfeld’s “backdoor compromises with the enemy or by simple bureaucratic refusal to work with fellow members of one’s own caucus.” Benson in turn accused Hall of being disgruntled because of the lapsed business relationship he had with Schonfeld as his lawyer. Hall assailed Benson’s uncritical defense of Schonfeld and the turn against other union “reformers who have become disenchanting with Schonfeld” (Spring 1973, 64). Still, disregarding the perhaps understandable and yet unfortunate viciousness of the exchange, I think Hall’s arguments about the importance of the caucus remaining a force after its candidates win office are wise and ring true, given what has occurred in unions with which I am most familiar: teachers unions that have elected progressive leaders committed to democracy and also subject to the conservatizing pressures of leading unions with members who do not share all of their political ideas.

An irony of Benson’s mentorship of activists who embraced the same political tradition that he had in his youth was that those who “industrialized” conceived of the working class in a way Benson

himself called into question: “The goal of democratic social control of ownership is in the common interests of government and private employees, independent workers, artists, professionals, working farmers, students—the 99 percent mass of humanity. To pinch that goal into the narrow notion of ‘workers’ state’ is to limit the appeal of the socialist message. Not ‘workers’ state’ but ‘democratic socialist state’ to break the hold of capital and install democratic control over the economy.” But the turn to the working class operationalized the traditional Marxist definition of which unions and work counted—manufacturing, communications, and transportation—and resulted in the exit of socialists out of white collar, public employee unions in which they had established credibility and leadership. Steve Zeluck described the vigorous challenge mounted in the American Federation of Teachers by proponents of democracy who allied with the Black community in demands for freedom and quality schools; that is just one example of the formidable influence socialists had in some public employee unions.¹² What would have occurred had socialists remained in these unions? We can’t say for certain, but we do know the loss of employment in manufacturing and industrial unions and the upsurge in militancy in teachers unions suggests, at the very least, a miscalculation about not only what was happening in capitalism but also how socialists should regard union work, what counts as work, and who comprises the working class.

Benson’s strict demarcation of the issues on which one should organize in unions, legal restrictions on democratic rights, contrasted with *NP*’s perspective of a porous boundary that made advances by the working class and society dependent on unions defending social justice. This idea is perhaps most evident in Julius Jacobson’s stirring defense of student radicals against their critics on the left, “In Defense of the Young,” in which he defended the importance of the working class and unions while criticizing their social conservatism. Given the horrific spectacle of working-class support for Trump and white supremacy in the recent election, the arguments Jacobson made are even more salient than they were when *NP* published the piece in spring 1970 and therefore are worth quoting at length:

Who among us was not shocked by the rhetorical and physical violence of New York construction workers in their “spontaneous” assault on children, students, bearded folk and uninvolved bystanders who had the temerity to defend teenagers being beaten by wrench wielding hardhats? Or did not suffer a touch of nausea watching workmen with brawny arms and shrivelled souls wave Confederate flags and placards declaring affection for Agnew, Nixon, the Establishment and their hatred of peaceniks, reds, long-haired sissies, faggots and hippies. ... Certainly, there are explanations for the workers’ animus toward the peace movement, and toward blacks. Although white workers generally enjoy a higher living standard today they are not economically or psychologically secure. They have no real future, they lack education and inner resources, and many people do look on them as inferiors. In other times and under other circumstances the ensuing bitterness could explode and overflow into rebellious and socially constructive channels.

For reasons we need not explore here, that is obviously not the case today. Instead, as a form of compensation, they begin to look upon themselves as pillars of society, seeking to overcome the insufficiency of their lives through an identification with the most conservative myths and prejudices that make up the American way of life. These attitudes are reinforced by their union officials whose one source of dismay is that too many rank-and-filers are then enchanted by Wallace, Nixon and Buckley instead of Johnson, Humphrey and Daley. (4)

We need only substitute “Biden, Harris, and Rahm Emanuel” for “Johnson, Humphrey and Daley” to make Jacobson’s analysis more current. The rest of the piece eviscerates arguments of intellectuals, especially Irving Howe and the “democratic left,” who chastised youthful protesters while encouraging validation of the most dangerous “desperadoes”—those in the Democratic Party. So much of the discussion is relevant today I can only encourage readers to read it for themselves.

However, what is germane in this article to my analysis is Jacobson's explicit rejection of what was Benson's trajectory, the path of "older people who were radical or revolutionary in their youth but, having grown tired, disillusioned, and frustrated over the failure of independent socialist politics, have moved in an increasingly rightward direction, discovering en route all sorts of wondrous things in liberal (and not so liberal) institutions and values." (6)

The Jacobsons retained the WP and ISL ideals of revolutionary opposition to capitalism and communism, as well as the role of the working class in those struggles. One sees in *NP* through the years adumbration of the Third Camp even when the analysis isn't presented as such. In contrast to the defense of socialist ideals in *NP*, Benson's almost messianic belief in the solitary role of union democracy and democratized unions seems his own "mystical consolation" for the Third Camp.

Although he doesn't identify it as such, Jacobson's proposal to the young outlines the contours of the Third Camp, and it is noteworthy that this includes the fight for social justice as inseparable from the struggle for union democracy:

I propose: 1) that the young devote a considerable portion of their energies to building a new radical party in this country, completely independent of the two capitalist parties; 2) that the young reach out intelligently to the working class—from within the trade union movement and without—supporting their economic struggles and countering the conservative influences of the labor bureaucracy; 3) that they continue to demand the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of all American troops from Indochina; 4) that they protest the monstrous mistreatment of the Black Panthers, the manner in which the past Democratic Administration tolerated and the present Nixon Administration encourages the extermination of the Panthers and the assaults on their organization; 5) that they fight for community control of the schools which, in New York City, means to wage a struggle against the reactionary Shanker leadership of the United Federation of Teachers, a leadership which appeals to the basest prejudices of its most backward members for support; 6) that they commit themselves to a consistent revolutionary struggle for democracy—i.e. to socialism—with the realization that all forms of totalitarianism (Russian, Chinese or Cuban) are no less the enemy of socialism than capitalist imperialism. (9)

Much else *NP* has published, too many articles for me to name, elaborates the idea that union democracy and social justice are inseparable in the fight for socialism. Without realizing it, Benson himself explains why this is the case. Conceptualizing the new, historically unique configuration of economic and political arrangements in Russia as a new *social system*, which the WP called "bureaucratic collectivism," and its symbiotic relationship with capitalism recentered the concept of capitalism as a social system, not only a set of property and political arrangements, about which Marx was clear. Forms of social oppression are embedded in capitalism (and other class societies), so there is no separating the fight for democracy in unions—and society—from struggles against racism, xenophobia, sexism, war, and the new forms of injustice social movements emerge to fight. We often see the natural affinity of social justice and economic issues when workers consider forming unions to protect their interests. Even the *New York Times* "gets" this connection, as seen in this letter to the workplace adviser in the "Business" section:

Before the pandemic, I worked in the outdoor adventure industry as a multiday river guide. For many, it's a dream job—living outside in beautiful places, adventuring on big whitewater. However, the rosy outside perspectives are underlain by the same plagues of the regular work force: unreliable schedules, cash tips, unpaid training, no benefits, unsafe working conditions, wage theft, racism, sexism, homophobia, fatphobia, etc.

What advice do you have for starting a union in a nontraditional workplace? There is

excitement among the guides, but none are organizers.¹³

The stirrings of opposition to oppression are often molecular, occurring without being apparent to those not closely involved—until resistance crystallizes in political actions, often protests and demonstrations. Arguments such as Benson’s that union reform must take up “class” demands first ignore much history, most recently the origins of the 2018 teacher walkouts in activists’ work in social movements outside of labor.¹⁴ Fusing social justice concerns with creating democratic unions is complex and difficult, a work in process that is never complete. But one key is learning how to cast struggles so they are seen as a function of workers’ self-interest, not allowing them to become competing demands for scarce resources.

Discussing how that can be done is urgent, but the starting point is taking up the challenge. In that regard, the pages of *NP* have much to teach us.

Notes

1. Sam Roberts, “Herman Benson, Who Fought Union Corruption, Dies at 104,” *New York Times*, July 10, 2020.
2. Documents of the International Socialists (U.S.) 1969-1986.
3. “The heart of the ‘third camp,’” *Workers’ Liberty*, May 9, 2012.
4. Daniel Randall, “Herman Benson (1915-2020): No Socialism Without Democracy,” *New Politics*, July 17, 2020.
5. Herman Benson, “1939: Soviets Invade Poland. Defensist? Imperialist?” *New Politics* (No. 62, Winter 2017).
6. “The heart of the ‘third camp,’” *Workers’ Liberty*.
7. Herman Benson, “Real Unions and Unreal Unions: A Reply to Dan La Botz,” *New Politics*, July 11, 2013.
8. “The heart of the ‘third camp,’” *Workers’ Liberty*.
9. Articles in *New Politics* published in its first two decades are currently available online only in an archive digitized by Ron Unz. The editorial board is shifting this archive to the *New Politics* website. If you’ve read this endnote and you haven’t contributed to the current fund appeal, you can help us make this transition with a donation:
10. “Sober thoughts after inspiring years of union organizing,” *Union Democracy Review* (Issue 199, 3,5, April/May 2013).
11. Lois Weiner, “The Red State Walkouts,” *New Politics*, April 6, 2018.
12. In “The UFT Strike: A Blow Against Teacher Unionism,” *New Politics* (Winter 1968), 5-14, Steve Zeluck describes the considerable influence of opposition activists in the American Federation of Teachers.
13. Roxane Gay, “Whitewater Unions, and a Toobin-Like Bathroom Mistake,” *New York Times*, Oct. 30, 2020.
14. Erin Dyke and Brendan Muckian-Bates, “Social Movements Gave Rise to the ‘Teachers’ Revolt,’

Not Bernie," *New Politics*, Nov. 6, 2019.

[Editors' note: We continue discussion on our website of the issues in this article, with Nelson Lichtenstein's response, a reply by Lois Weiner, and Kim Moody's answer to both. We welcome further commentary.]