

Real Unions and Unreal Unions

This discussion has shifted ground. It started with what I proposed, but now we're discussing Dan La Botz's views on the AFL-CIO. I wrote about the need to democratize unions. Dan wants to turn existing unions into "real unions."

Rich Trumka solicited comments from friends of the labor movement on how the AFL-CIO might best prepare for the future. I replied by suggesting that if unions were thoroughly democratized, millions of members who were now indifferent to their unions or disenchanted could be imbued with the conviction that their unions truly belonged to them and not to the salaried officialdom.

And so, the labor movement, which now depends upon an active cadre of thousands to bring its message to the nation, could recruit from its own ranks an 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. In this, I do believe. I offered no new program, no alternate leadership, no cure for AIDS, no cure for the many social and economic ills of the nation or of the labor movement.

Knowing something about Dan and, as an interested reader of what he writes, I am sure he agrees with what I proposed. But he says not a word about the essence of what I wrote. I don't know if he even noticed it. He is too troubled by the few nice things I said about the AFL-CIO.

He sees a fatal contradiction between criticizing the AFL-CIO leadership and then noting that the federation has been moving in the right direction. But why? Joe Rauh used to say: "We don't want to tear down labor's flag, we only want to wash out

the stains.” The reality is that the labor movement has been moving, slowly, in the right direction precisely because of the criticism, the dissident activity of union democrats and reformers. In 2005, the book *Rebels, Reformers, and Racketeers* added the subtitle, “How insurgents transformed the labor movement.” It was too optimistic. While the decades of insurgent activity did not “transform” the labor movement, it certainly did move it in the right direction; and there is evidence all over the place. I don’t think that Dan would agree with those who claim that all that reform activity was fruitless.

Dan insists that “we need a completely different labor movement if we are to have real unions.” Does he really believe that? The unions and the labor movement we have today may not meet our standards, but they are real enough for us to support against attack and to applaud efforts to recruit and retain members. In the same declamatory spirit, he writes of the “70-year degeneration of the labor movement.”

At the risk of alienating Dan and/or his co-thinkers, I admit I see it differently; I don’t think that the more extreme the language you devise in analyzing unions, the more it demonstrates your consistent militancy and hones your effectiveness. I see the labor movement as weaker, relatively smaller, and on the defensive, but it is not in a state of “degeneration.”

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. Organized crime, while still a problem, has been pushed back, notably in the Teamsters union. The combined effort of reformers and government has made internal democracy more secure. Increasingly, unions recognize the need to work with community activists.

I will agree that in this time of troubles, when unions have been put on the defensive, the dominant labor union officialdom has not displayed the kind of strong leadership we need. Even within the limits of what can be done, they have failed. And that lack has been only partially offset by independent militants, reformers, and insurgents; I am familiar with their battles because I have been working with them for the last fifty years. But at the further risk of disappointing Dan, I must add: The root cause of labor's setbacks lies not in the derelictions of its top leadership, but in the major national and international political and economic trends of our era:

The demise of the New Deal coalition and the persisting strength of conservatism which can count upon the support of half the nation and the Supreme Court; the decline of manufacturing in the United States; the change in the nature of our work force; low wage competition from so-called developing countries. The success of anti-union forces in pitting people in private industry against public employees.

I realize that some may be leery of citing these facts for fear of minimizing the shortcomings of our established labor leadership. Not at all. We must face the reality to assess the validity of our own program and not get swept away by our own rhetoric.

What are the essential qualities of that "completely different labor movement" and those "real unions"? Dan explains that "they will have to build a movement prepared to engage in job actions and wildcat strikes that violate the contract, meaning that they risk their jobs and court action that will penalize their unions economically, and they will have to engage in civil disobedience and be prepared to go to jail." More broadly, he adds that they "will have to transform their pro-capitalist ideology, restructure their bureaucratic organizations, and once again inspire militant class struggle unionism."

Of course, at critical moments unions have to be ready to take that kind of militant action when need be and when it can be effective. From time to time, some of our most conservative unions have been good at it. But can that be the crux of a union program today? Is that the centerpiece of any program reformers and militants should advance in their unions today? In this, I admit, Dan is in good company. At the 1995 convention, when John Sweeney was pushing his successful insurgent campaign for AFLCIO presidency he told the delegates they had to be ready to "Block bridges" in labor's battles. He was greeted with wild applause from the delegates, most of whom were paid AFLCIO officers and staff. Everyone likes to dream of going into glorious battle. But almost no one, not even Sweeney, did much about it, not because they were sellouts, but because back in their unions, it didn't seem the answer.

In reply to Sweeney, Tom Donahue said "We have to build bridges." It is true that in the past decades, there have been decisive moments that cried out for militant civil disobedience in labor battles. In a few instances today, mostly minor, they have been successful. But the dominant call, the most consistent appeal, coming from labor reformers has been for unions to build bridges: to minorities, immigrants, women's groups, churches, community organizations.

When Dan comes down to earth and assesses real unions in real battles, he ignores his own exacting standards. For example: he cites two models of his kind of real unionism: Miners for Democracy and the strike led by the Chicago Teachers union.

The Miners for Democracy was a remarkable and admirable insurgent reform caucus. It ousted the murderous leadership of the United Mine Workers. It rallied support, financial and legal, from liberals and civil libertarians. With the volunteer help of a team of pro-labor attorneys, it wielded its own rights under federal law, and it expanded union democracy law to the advantage of all unionists in all unions.

It inspired movements for democracy in other unions. Teamsters for a Democratic Union modeled its very name on theirs.

But there was no bashing of capitalism, no civil disobedience, few of the standards for "real unionism," no breaking the law. Quite the contrary, they made effective use of the law. In tendency, the miners and their leaders leaned conservatively. Its attorneys were standard Democratic leftish liberals. The man who inspired the movement at the cost of his life, Jock Yablonski, was a mainstream union leader right out of the old UMW incumbent leadership who finally realized that miners needed union democracy.

The Chicago teachers gave a great lift to union morale. At a time when teachers and their unions face unremitting attack from governments, moneyed capitalists, and conservatives and criticism even from liberal politicians, the union demonstrated that it is possible, under strong leadership, to gain public support and win a strike. An insurgent caucus convinced the membership to replace an inactive leadership with one more militant. Yes, the CTU is obviously a real union. But like the Miners for Democracy it hardly meets Dan's criteria. This was no wildcat strike, no break with capitalist ideology, no massive civil disobedience. The new officers led teachers in an effective, classical union strike, solid and disciplined.

The point is this: The models selected by Dan to illustrate "real unionism" do not meet his own standards. There must be something seriously wrong with those standards.

I can't throw off the nagging notion that I'm making too much of this discussion. I realize that what Dan writes here is not a guide to action, but the kind of evangelical rhetoric that many radicals welcome, inspiring them to persist in the unending battle for social justice. I hate to interfere with that process and do so only reluctantly just to clear the air.

In my submission to Trumka, I listed nine practical steps unions can take to democratize. I'd be interested in the reactions from leaders and members of unions, both real and unreal. Is it possible to get to that discussion?

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PS: Just for the record: Trumka was never *a leader* of the Miners for Democracy. At the time, he was an aspiring young lawyer who, among others, was helping Joe Rauh and Chip Yablonski provide legal support for the dissident miners. Praiseworthy, but no leader.