

Inside the House of Labor

April 3, 2010

WHILE THE LABOR MOVEMENT in the United States is a beacon for democracy, too often it fails as a beacon of democracy. Herman Benson makes this clear in his remarkable personal memoir, *Rebels, Reformers and Racketeers: How Insurgents Transformed the Labor Movement*.

In this account of a lifetime of support for the advancement of democracy inside the house of labor, you'll find the better-known characters and their stories of labor misdeeds, such as United Mine Workers President Tony Boyle and the coal miner he had murdered for challenging him, Jock Yablonski. But the compelling stories of lesser knowns who took on crooked unions, like Dow Wilson and Lloyd Green of the San Francisco Brotherhood of Painters — both of whom were murdered for their courageous efforts — are a treasure trove of historical narrative about union politics, human frailties, and true grit that form the largely untold dark drama of U.S. labor history of the last half century.

This book is about individuals, including Benson himself, who had the courage of their convictions. It is also about the cynic-inspiring tenacity, and the sometimes criminality, of so-called union leaders who fought rank-and-file insurgents at every turn. This includes the deeply troubling role of the AFL-CIO throughout much of the history covered in Benson's book.

Benson was present at the rebirth, so to speak, of the U.S. labor movement in the first half of the twentieth century. He was imbued with social democratic and trade union principles when he joined the Young People's Socialist League as a teenager and witnessed the mass upsurge in union organizing that took place in the Great Depression era of the United States. After working in various blue collar jobs, he eventually helped edit *Labor Action*. During the 1950s he became increasingly aware of and deeply concerned about trade union rebels and reformers who were harassed, beaten — and sometimes murdered — when they voiced concerns about undemocratic and authoritarian union rule, missing union funds, and corrupt collusion with employers. Soon after, in 1960, he launched *Union Democracy in Action*, which was, as he writes in his book, "a one-man-band newsletter to break the story of the lonely union reformer." Benson, supporter of the often isolated union rebel, began his new career in the mirror image of those he championed. He spent the next dozen years as a lonely crusader supporting union insurgents' efforts to apply the provisions of federal legislation adopted in 1959 designed to enforce basic democratic rights in unions, the Labor-Management Reporting and Disclosure Act (LMRDA).

Benson brought attention to the courageous union members who stood up to labor union thugs and gangsters — union leaders in name only — who controlled jobs, colluded with employers, tolerated no internal union dissent, threatened and carried out violence, and used the union treasury as a personal piggy bank, also known as stealing. Despite this corruption that threatened to undermine public confidence in labor unions and the future growth of organized labor, all of which Benson fought so hard to expose, the AFL-CIO did nothing.

Twelve years after he launched *Union Democracy in Action*, Benson had succeeded in developing a network of rank-and-file union activists. He wanted to do something larger, but he had no money and remained isolated from funds that might be secured from sometime supporters — social liberals with means, civil libertarians and labor progressives and intellectuals. While feeling discouraged, his vision and tenacity inspired support from an unlikely source. An old YPSL friend, now with money, donated nearly \$40,000 to help Benson launch the Association for Union Democracy in 1972.

Through law suits, public campaigns, education classes, and its newsletter, *Union Democracy Review*, the AUD under Benson supported labor movement reformers fighting to gain control of their unions by strengthening union democracy and eradicating corruption in campaigns against entrenched power in unions large and small, but notably the Civil Service Employees Association in New York, Steel Workers, International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers and the construction industry, International Longshoremens Association, United Mine Workers of America, and of course, the International Brotherhood of Teamsters (IBT).

Benson describes with satisfaction how the U.S. Justice Department's consent decree imposed on the Teamsters in 1989 facilitated the election of reformer Ron Carey to the office of Teamster General President in 1991. Carey subsequently had the IBT rejoin the AFL-CIO, whose votes made the crucial difference in the 1995 election of upstart John Sweeney as president of the labor federation, the first contested election in the then 40-year history of the AFL-CIO. Sweeney's election created a sense of hope that it was a new day for organized labor in the United States — hope that labor's advancing decline could be halted and that a reinvigorated effort to "organize the unorganized" would lead eventually to millions of new union members at the dawn of a new century. Was this unique democratic moment — a palpable demand among unionists for accountability in the life of this otherwise long-entrenched bureaucracy — fueled by the cumulative effect of AUD's efforts, especially with regard to developments within the Teamsters? Benson believes that it was.

But nine years later it is hard to recall that sense of hope spawned by this democratic moment. Herman Benson's book arrives at a time of great unease about the future of organized labor in the United States. The condition of the U.S. labor movement has worsened considerably since 1995, threatening a transformation of the labor movement different from the hopeful vision suggested in the title of Benson's book. The increasing disconnects between collective bargaining and union power are widening: wage increases are smaller, health care and pension benefits are less secure, and the right to strike and the right to organize are functionally legal fictions. These conditions will only worsen given the reelection of George W. Bush.

There is insufficient evidence that a democratic transformation of the labor movement continued to develop following the change at the top of the AFL-CIO in 1995. Service Employees International Union President Andrew Stern released a discussion paper on the future of organized labor, *Unite to Win*, just after the November election. To his credit, Stern is promoting a discussion about the need for restructuring the labor movement in significant ways so that unions can better represent workers, organize more workers and win better contracts. Though the issuance of the discussion paper is itself a refreshing democratic act by a major labor leader, the substance of the document mentions the word democracy only twice. Stern's six-page paper is constructed around ten key points, important all, but not one specifies the need for more democracy at all levels of the labor movement.

From my perch, the biggest internal threat to the labor movement is apathy and lack of involvement by rank-and-file union members. To organize the unorganized, and to organize the organized, requires member involvement because labor's power lies in the mobilization of its members. Involvement and mobilization are indicative of and the result of a union that reflects the more democratic society we want to create. As Benson writes eloquently in his closing chapter, "The Power of Democracy,"

The existence of democracy does not eliminate the need for intelligent leadership nor does it automatically supply constructive policies; but it does serve as a means of finding that leadership, arriving at those policies, and rallying public support for them. Meanwhile, the discussion, the debate, the political and social battles continue while we

search for answers. It is not absurd, in fact it is the essence of realism, to suggest that an infusion of the spirit of democracy in its own internal life will make the labor movement a more powerful force and give it moral authority in the defense of social justice as the battle over social policy continues.

All too often, the power of information, ideas, access to people, shared leadership, collectively developed vision and strategies are in the hands of a few, often the senior elected officers and senior staff, rather than dispersed across the organization and its members. If we demand equality, fairness, and democracy, we must practice it within our labor organizations. If we do not practice our core values, then why would anyone want to join us in our pursuit of economic justice and democratic participation?

When Benson, now in his mid-eighties, launched the Association for Union Democracy in 1972, he surely had no idea that such a little-funded and small operation would still be operating more than thirty years later, but AUD, now based with a small staff in Brooklyn, continues today. But still today, among many in official union circles, AUD is looked upon with the same loathing as a union buster. Why this is so surely has much to do with Benson's views on "the divided soul of American labor leadership." Benson writes that "the labor movement . . . stands on the side of the people against the privileges of wealth, for workers rights against corporate power. But on all of the issues that involve the rights of workers inside their unions, that same labor movement, as represented by most of its top officials, stubbornly defends limitations, restrictions and repression."

To help sooth, and enlighten, the divided soul of American labor leadership, Benson's book could have strengthened its noble message by exploring what are the deep roots of U.S. trade union corruption and discussing the problems of democracy:

- Organized labor in the United States developed in the context of a particular capitalist country since the civil war. How has this shaped the nature and extent of our nation's union corruption?
- How does the amount of and nature of union corruption in the United States compare to union corruption in other countries?
- What is the importance of democracy in unions relative to other essential components of building organizational power? For example, if a union has many of the forms of democracy without the substance of power — if technological change and plant closings have drastically reduced union density and bargaining power, or the number of signatory employers is in decline — what is the meaning of democracy in this context?
- Running a union is very difficult even in the best of circumstances because a union must be, as A.J. Muste wrote more than 70 years ago, an "army and town meeting." Because both features are permanent, the conflicts within unions to forge both power *and* community may be a sign of life and strong leadership and not an indication of a lack of democracy.

Writing in the *Harvard Business Review* 40 years ago in an article entitled, "Democracy Is Inevitable," Philip Slater and Warren Bennis argued that "democracy becomes a functional necessity whenever a social system is competing for survival under conditions of chronic change." If their

proposition is true and relevant to the U.S. labor movement today, and I believe it is, then Herman Benson's book and its emphasis on democracy as a strategy for labor's revival could not be timelier.