

Union Democracy and “The Final Goal”

March 20, 2021



Lois Weiner [1] has done a great service both in reminding us of the important work of Herman Benson and the Association for Union Democracy (AUD), its roots on the Third Camp socialist tradition, but also the limits Benson accepted by his rejection of the “the final goal”; i.e. socialist democracy. As Lois points out, the importance of union democracy lies not only in creating more effective unions, but as part of the process of building workers’ self-activity and confidence as well as a broader social outlook in the movement toward that final goal. For those of us in the broad Third Camp or “socialism from below” tendency democracy is a central part of building the power of working class people on the job, in the union, and in broader society as Lois argues. When the vision of socialism and its possibility is lost, the notion of workers’ democracy tends to be reduced to the institutions of formal democracy, while the fight for these relies primarily on legal strategies, often with reduced emphasis on the self-organization and action of the union members themselves in favor of the courts. For many of us who were aware of the work of Benson and AUD and saw it as valuable, this, nonetheless, seemed a severe limitation.

Since we are dealing with aspects of the history of the Third Camp tendency and Benson’s place in it, I have to take issue with Lois’s assessment that “Benson mentored student activists from the 1960s and 1970s who identified with the independent socialist tradition...,” including those who later helped organize TDU and *Labor Notes*. At that time, the major mentors for those of us in the Independent Socialist Clubs (ISC) and later the International Socialist (IS) on matters of trade union politics were above all Hal Draper and particularly Stan Weir. More than any others, they helped shape our views on union democracy and rank and file organization from the mid-1960s through the early 1970s. Few of us had any contact with Benson until much later. In my case, the older “Third Camp” people I knew in New York in that period aside from the ISC/IS members were precisely Julius and Phyllis Jacobson, Bert Hall, and others around *New Politics*, for which I occasionally wrote. When several of us in the IS ran into legal problems during the long strike against N.Y. Telephone by the Communications Workers in 1971-72 in which we were active, it was Bert Hall we turned to. So, I share Lois’s regard for these comrades.

Other mentors at that time included the older socialists in the UAW in Detroit such as Art and Edie Fox, and Pete Kelly who were leaders of the United National Caucus, and somewhat later Erwin

Bauer. For them and for us, Benson's attachment to the UAW's Public Review Board as a means of securing members' rights was incomprehensible. Interestingly, Benson was forced to back track on seeing the UAW as a model of democracy somewhat when in the 1980s Victor Reuther broke with the UAW's Administrative Caucus "family" to side with the New Directions opposition caucus. Since that time, AUD has generally adopted a broader view of things than the original focus on the legal rights of union members contained in the Labor-Management Reporting and Disclosure Act. In part, this was due to the influence of TDU, New Directions, and *Labor Notes*, as well as to the broader perspectives of newer AUD staff members. I think even Benson took on a broader view of things over time. When I was on a panel with him commemorating the life and work of Stan Weir several years ago his presentation, while still sceptical about the "final goal", was quite broad ranging about what he called "injustice" and the social movements.

Lois is right, of course, to point to the problems of trying to use or influence the state or courts in union work. Yet, I think Nelson Lichtenstein, in his reply to Lois, is also right that the problem is not solved by simple rejection. I agree that direct action is best, but it is not always possible and, indeed, sometimes using legal channels is the only way to fight victimization. There is more to this question, of course. For example, was TDU correct to have pushed for direct elections of union leaders in 1989-90 as an alternative to the government's "trusteeship," in what proved a prolonged government oversight? I think so. This same question has come up again in the case of the UAW where a rank and file caucus has won the right to a referendum of the direct vote, which is reported on by Nelson in *Labor Notes*. While, as he points out in his comments on Lois's *New Politics* article, the direct vote is not a panacea, it is nevertheless a significant opening for changing a union long in decline. It seems to me it would have been irresponsible in both cases for the rank and file dissidents and reformers not to intervene in the state's efforts to control or reshape the union in order to achieve the most democratic outcome possible.

The fact is the question of the state and the unions is a dilemma that won't go away and for which there is no simple answer. The modern capitalist state exists to protect, advance, and mediate conflicts within capitalism and within the capitalist class as well as to keep the masses as passive as possible. But it is also a complex, multi-layered, ubiquitous, and contradictory phenomenon in which, as Nelson argues, social movements including labor can at times intervene in one way or another to undo past injustices and win social and economic gains sometimes through legislation. It just doesn't work to separate the unions from other social movements in this matter because the state works similarly to penetrate, influence, divert, or suppress all such movements. Look at the "liberal" state's involvement in the civil rights movement and Martin Luther King, Jr., and the COINTELPRO penetration of the anti-war movement.

Finally, I completely agree with Lois's critique of Nelson's suggestion that union democracy can be put on the back burner due to the "hard slog" that is union organizing today and the massive power of big business to resist unionization. As I have argued elsewhere [2] organizing the millions in these new industries and corporations, not to mention auto, steel, and other old industries where hundreds of thousands of workers remain unorganized, cannot be done with current bureaucratic organizing techniques no matter how refined, going from one NLRB election or "neutrality" card check to the next. There are not enough staff organizers in all the unions together to take on even Amazon alone.

As I write, the 5,800 workers at Amazon's Bessemer, Alabama fulfilment center are voting to win recognition by the Retail, Whole, and Department Store Union (RWDSU), an affiliate of the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW), which Nelson has covered in *Labor Notes*. Their victory is obviously crucial and can be a key to the future. But as of March 2021, Amazon has 819 facilities in the United States, up from 359 two years ago with an additional 286 facilities planned for the future. Its workforce is approaching 850,000 full-time and part-time workers in the US up from 500,000 in 2019 with more to come. It should be fairly clear that the RWDSU or the UFCW are not going to

organize this monster by themselves or by the usual sloggling through NLRB or card check campaigns even with a better NLRB and if Congress passes the Pro-Act sometime in the next year or so to make it easier.

Organizing Amazon and for that matter Google, Walmart, non-union hospital systems, unorganized warehouses, auto parts firms and “transplants,” etc. is going to take the kind of mass mobilizations and confrontations that have characterized previous leaps in union membership. Occupations, sit-down strikes, active strikes, mass picketing, the closing of geographically strategic facilities in the supply chain, etc. will be needed. The activation of union members or at least of the activist layer in Metro areas where they are concentrated and where most of today’s Amazon, logistics, and even manufacturing facilities are located and clustered to reach out to unorganized workers is simply a necessity. Responding to workers when they call for help and not just sticking to yesterday’s neatly worked out plan because we don’t do “hot shops” should also be common practice. How many of the cries for help from Amazon workers during the pandemic have been ignored by unions in the past year? The fact that there are only two official organizing drives at Amazon’s hundreds of facilities, that in Alabama and a Teamster drive in Iowa recently announced, and that such help as has been available elsewhere has come from the resource-strapped UE allied with local DSA chapters through the Emergency Workplace Organizing Committee or from Amazon workers themselves answers that question.

It also has to be recognized that the old industrial lines, including those between goods and service production, have been altered, obscured, and overlapped by criss-crossing supply chains, private equity deals, mergers, expansions, and increased interdependency. Amazon is itself an example of this. It is a retailer in almost every line of goods; a land and air “first mile”, intermediate, and “last mile” transport firm; logistics network organizer; user and supplier of data and communications services to just about every industry in the US and beyond; a manufacturer; a major financial player, and of course a political operator many of whose executives and managers give heavily to the Democratic Party.

For the most part, (there are always exceptions) today’s bureaucratic unions are poorly suited to deal with this situation precisely because they have encouraged a passive membership and rely too heavily on staff resources or worse on Democratic administrations over the years. Union democracy or more accurately the transformation of major unions into living democratic participatory organizations and cultures is a necessity precisely because of the corporations’ massive powers of resistance. I’m not suggesting we wait until such transformations have taken place, but that the fight for such changes be part of what socialists and other activists do as they work to push their unions to organize in new ways today—or, perhaps, support new democratic unions where necessary. Just as living union democracy is degraded to formalisms by legalistic approaches when we lose sight of the “final goal”, so if we surrender the transformation of today’s unions *and* those that arise anew as workers find current unions inadequate to the tasks of today, so we will see organizing degraded to routine, even if improved, NLRB elections and lost opportunities.

While Nelson is right that you don’t necessarily have to be a revolutionary socialist or Third Camper to appreciate the importance of democracy in social movements, it is nonetheless suggestive that all of the major surviving organizations directly concerned with union democracy and rank and file organization from that earlier period—AUD, *Labor Notes*, and TDU—have their roots in that socialist tradition. Or that the best single handbook on union democracy, *Democracy is Power* by Mike Parker and Martha Gruelle from *Labor Notes*, was written by veterans of that tradition. Thanks again to Lois for reminding us of the importance of that tradition.

[1] Since the three of us have known each other for a long time, I have adopted Lois's practice of using first names.

[2] Kim Moody, "Reversing the "Model": Thoughts on Jane McAlevey's Plan for Union Power" *Spectre*, Vol. 1, Issue 2 (Fall 2020), 61- 75.