# Union Democracy is Our Goal But Is It Practical? Responding to Nelson Lichtenstein

written by Lois Weiner | February 14, 2021

Nelson Lichtenstein and I agree on two major ideas that I think distinguish our shared viewpoint from the practice of many union officials and some of their supporters on the left. One is the importance of union democracy in principle. Another is the need for unions to be part of a larger movement for progressive social change. Moreover, Nelson's corrective to one of my conclusions is well-taken: "One does not have to be a socialist or revolutionary or Third Camper to link a program of democracy to that of progressive social change. Nor to see the unions as part of a larger social movement."[i] He's right. Liberals and social democrats have supported labor's taking up the mantle of social justice. Yet, while one need not be revolutionary or even a socialist to see the connections between union democracy, a labor movement committed to fighting for social justice, and an energized rank and file, it is also the case that historically these linkages have been made most consistently by the revolutionary left, as Nelson's own seminal study on the CIO demonstrated so well.

His piece in Labor Notes on corruption in the UAW adds useful historical evidence to support our shared case for union democracy. He notes "Teamwork in the leadership, solidarity in the ranks" was a slogan the UAW deployed to confront the auto corporations during the union's post-World War II heyday," Although Nelson doesn't draw this parallel, I suggest the UAW's use of this motto and the subsequent decline of union democracy show the need for conscious efforts to sustain independence of a vibrant caucus committed to democracy, to keep "solidarity in the ranks" from becoming "You're divisive if you don't do what the leadership says."

At one time Benson was indeed "looking to democratize a labor movement that then seemed too enmeshed with the Democrats and the postwar state" but if he held that point of view when he started the Association for Union Democracy (AUD) it wasn't expressed in his writing for New Politics, AUD, or Dissent. I think his subsequent quietude on labor's relationship to the Democrats may have been related to his uncritical drive for labor law reform for union democracy. And while I concur with Nelson about use of the bourgeois state to further democratic rights, like voting, the specific question I pursue is whether labor law should be seen as posing dangers for unions and union democracy, for reasons Nelson himself has articulated in *A Contest of Ideas: Capital, Politics, and Labor*. Analyzing how human rights relate to union rights, Nelson clarifies the difference between civil rights and the rights workers' must exercise collectively at the workplace. He observes "Rights are universal and individual, which means employers and individual members of management enjoy them just as much as workers" (p.150 ). He warns "The spread of employee rights has suffered through its necessary dependence on professional governmental expertise. No

matter how well constructed, such regulation takes disputes out of the hands of those directly involved… "(p. 153). Drawing on this distinction, I pursue an issue Stanley Aronowitz raised long ago: (How) do labor law and the courts restrain militancy? The Federal court decision in SEIU's suit against the NUHW, which held that local leaders are responsible to the international union, not their members, and that individual officers are financially liable for damages when they represent their members' decisions, shows how the courts and labor law can be used against union reformers defending union members' democratic rights. Isn't this a danger we need to interrogate?

Perhaps the most significant disagreement Nelson and I have is about how union democracy relates to union strength, including the current struggles to organize workers in the gig economy and tech giants. How unions organize to win elections and collective bargaining frames what occurs during and after those victories. When unions do not develop a local cadre during the initial organizing campaigns, members remain dependent on union staff to conduct negotiations. They convey to members their role is allowing the "experts," staff and lawyers, to win contracts and improvements at the table. Consequently workers lack confidence and do not acquire skills to protect the contract that has been signed. Worse, as I have seen first-hand from advising education workers who want to form unions, even if a cadre exists that is seasoned politically, adept at organizing, and confident about what they want to win with the union's help, the union apparatus is an impediment, unable to accommodate organizing that doesn't fit its mold. This is a recipe for alienation and backlash at a time when the Right is ready to capitalize on workers' disenchantment. As Kim Moody argues so persuasively in his critique of the "model" Jane McAlevey has advanced, a model adopted by at least two large unions representing preK-12 teachers, union democracy requires a union culture as well as explicit policies that put staff in the role of supporting rank-and-file members to "own" the union at the workplace through their organizing.

Yes it will be a "hard slog" to organize workers in Walmart, Amazon, Google, in fact most workers in the changed conditions of capitalism globally. There are no shortcuts, but some ideas are better than others in this struggle. Nelson concludes the staggering power of management combined with organized labor's paltry membership numbers requires choosing organizing victories over union democracy. In other words, union democracy isn't practical. In fact, union democracy is more essential for unions and workers' struggles today than it was when Herman Benson created AUD, precisely because of our current political landscape of burgeoning social movements for equality and justice, movements that dwarf unions in dynamism. Union democracy strengthens organizing when it creates opportunities for workers to collaborate as respectful equals, pushing back on social divisions – racism, xenophobia, sexism – that have fractured and poisoned the working class and weakened struggles for improvements on the job for all workers.

Union democracy is achingly difficult to win, a huge challenge to sustain, and absolutely essential to workers' exercise of their collective power to protect the conditions of their labor and win social justice. The stunning courage and energy in teachers' "red state" walkouts, apparent too in the reform caucuses emerging in so many unions in the education sector and beyond, is fueled by a hunger for voice and power in the job, in other words, for democracy. If unions aren't democratic themselves, they can't bring democracy to the workplace, and they have little chance of beating back the bosses and the ruling class. We shouldn't make the mistake our enemies do, of mistaking idealism for naivete. The fight for union democracy is one of the most practical ideas labor can adopt.

Lois Weiner

[i] Nelson's reply to my article was originally a comment in correspondence I initiated with him about the piece. He generously agreed to have it posted as an article. My rejoinder to him adopts a first-name address because of this context and our many years of sharing ideas, informally.