Why does the union bureaucracy exist?

Tom Wetzel

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Editor's note: This is the first installment of an essay on unionism which will be published as a series in the next several issues of the magazine.

This magazine was founded with the aim of advocating a particular viewpoint: The idea that the whole workforce in society has the potential power to create a new society without domination and exploitation, a society where workers directly manage the places where they work and plan the economy's direction for the common benefit rather than private profit.

Our idea is that this power to change society would be developed through workers organizing a labor movement that was run directly by workers themselves, not controlled by a hierarchy of paid officials. These self-managed workers organizations would prefigure and guarantee the democratic, non-hierarchical structure of the new social arrangement by this workers movement. The building up of unions directly self-managed by the rank-and-file is this, a strategy for achieving a libertarian, worker-managed society.

But this strategy immediately raises many questions. Can unionism be a force for fundamental social change in the direction of workers control? And what should be our stance towards the AFL-CIO-type unions? Can these unions be transformed? Is it inevitable that unions should become bureaucratic? In order to answer such questions, we need to consider why the labor movement is presently dominated by the top-down, conservative bureaucracies of the AFL-CIO-type.

If we look back over the history of worker struggles, we find that unionism has not developed in a steady, continuous way. On the contrary, workers organization has tended to make major advances only during certain periods, periods characterized by more widespread worker participation and solidarity in conflicts with the employing class.

Such periods often see the rise of new types of organizations, and the sudden spread of new tactics and actions. The city-wide general strikes of 1934, the sudden growth of new unions in the mid '30s, and the quick spread of the sitdown strikes in 1937 attest to the wider and deeper solidarity that was being manifested by workers in that decade. The greater willingness of people to support each other in struggles, and the wider participation of workers, made for greater impact on society.

A united workforce has potential power only because nothing can be produced and distributed without our labor. But people are not going to count on this power in considering their options in society as long as it remains dormant. Ideas about changing society are more likely to make sense to people in a period when workers are building a movement that actually displays this power. As the working class becomes more united through collective struggle, this changes the sense of power people have.

It is only during a period when the working class begins to develop this sort of united movement that talk of social change in the direction of workers management of the economy can make sense. For, it is only the working class *as a whole* that *could* replace capitalism with a society where workers are no longer exploited by bosses. Any group smaller than the whole working class is merely one special interest group and only has the power to fight for adjustments in its position within the system, not a complete change of system.

During such a period of heightened struggle, workers begin to act in ways that are revolutionary. The famous sit-down strike at General Motors' huge complex in Flint,Michiganin 1937 is an example. Even though many probably most of the participants in that sit-down did not

consciously desire a revolution against capitalism yet the sit-down strike was, in itself, a revolutionary act. To seize possession of a General Motors factory, at a time when even the right to picket was not securely recognized in law in this country, was a revolutionary challenge to capital. And that's how the companies saw it at the time. Even though the workers didn't take over the factory to reorganize production for the common social benefit, it was a blow against employer's property rights

The sit-down strikes also tended to be organized directly by the workers themselves, not allowing outside control, not even by the United Auto Workers union hierarchy. Frank Marquart a participant in the early union struggles in the auto industry describes the way workers organized during the Detroit Dodge sitdown in April of '37:

> Invariably when workers take over a plant or city (during a general strike) they set up committees. This was the first thing the sit-downers did in the Dodge plant. A plant protection committee was delegated to see that no damage was done to company property. A member of that committee told me, y protecting the machines, we were protecting our jobs…Clean-up squads and scrub gangs have the plant a new look. As one striker put it: He had to clean the windows so we could see outside; they were so thick with grime that workers could not tell whether they were working the day or night shift. Food was brought to the plant by a caterer and a food committee supervised the mealtime arrangements. An investigating committee lost no time checking company records for espionage data…Other committees handled recreation, education, entertainment, and publicity. The Dodge sit-down strike, like other sit-down strikes in those days, became a model of workers' control not control of production, but control of the plant. (An Auto Workers' Journal, p. 78)

In taking over control of the plant, controlling the sitdown directly, and creating their own organization, the workers' action points to the possibility of workers self-management of the economy. Some participants in the sit-downs recognized this possibility:

> When we took over the plants we set up a government, a government of committees; all our activities were planned by committees. If we had to, we could have operated the plant by committees and made a better job of it than management does. Who gets out production when the plants operate? Who machines the parts and assembles the cars and works on the lines? The workers do all that. And if they can do it to make stockholders rich why can't they do it for themselves I mean why can't the working people run the factories and the mines and the farms and the offices for the benefit of all the people?[1]

But in saying that American workers were acting in revolutionary ways in the '30s, I am not saying that the workforce was about to overthrow capitalism or prepared for a complete change of system.

A workers revolution is an historical period of longer or shorter duration during which working people develop their power through collective action and solidarity and develop their cohesion, self-confidence and self-conscious aspirations towards replacing the bosses and creating their own system of workers management of the economy.

[1] A participant in the Flint sit-down, quoted by Marquart in An Auto Worker's Journal, p. 143

When people hear the word revolution often they think of guns and violent conflicts, and the downfall of governments. But that is not what I mean by workers revolution, which is a more deep-seated process leading towards basic change in how society is organized. There may be violent conflicts during a workers revolution, if the bosses' system employs violent means to save its crumbling order. But that violence would indicate that a change has already been taking place in the action and consciousness of the working class. And it is this change in the working class — its increasing rejection of the bosses' system in practice — that is the real revolution.

A revolution in this sense does not develop all of a sudden. Long before the working class is ready for a head-on challenge to boss power, the tendency towards workers' control of their own lives and work, towards solidarity with each other in opposition to their exploitation by the employing class, begins to be expressed in acts that we can say are revolutionary We hope that these revolutionary tendencies can be developed into a movement, a revolutionary unionism that facilitates greater cohesion and self-confidence, the extension of the movement, and the clearer awareness of the possibilities of social change that are contained in worker solidarity. But it is not inevitable that these embryonic tendencies will develop fully and place social transformation on the immediate agenda.

The embryonic revolutionary tendencies in a period of more widespread struggle are bound to co-exist with tendencies that accept capitalism, tendencies to accommodate to boss power. This contradiction has its foundation in the life of workers under capitalism. On the one hand, there exists a fundamental conflict of interests between workers and those who profit off our labor, between those who have power in the economy and those who are subject to its dictates on a daily basis. This conflict of interests leads to workers resistance, to strikes, worker organization.

Yet, as long as capitalism is intact, we also must sell the employers on our capabilities; we must cooperate with the bosses to live. The extent to which most workers will be inclined to accommodate to the employers depends on workers' sense of the relative power that they and the bosses possess in the immediate situation.

There are thus two contradictory forces that shape worker consciousness: on the one hand, the desire for control over our own lives and the need for solidarity with fellow workers, and, on the other hand, the need to cooperate with the bosses' institutions in order to prosper within this society.

In working class consciousness these two forces are reflected in two contradictory conceptions of the world and of workers' place in it: One that affirms the right of the employers to manage and make profits, and one that puts workers' interests first and assert workers' control.

The various institutions that affect popular consciousness, such as the press and television, schools and colleges, tend to reflect the needs and interests of the business class. Newspapers and book publishers, TV stations, and so on are also businesses and this shapes the environment for ideas in those institutions. Even if no overt censorship takes place, the people who work in, and manage, newspapers, schools, training programs and so on want to prosper. And in the normal working of the system their opportunities depend upon accommodation to the interests of the employing class. Thus, the ideas that become dominant at a given time are normally those that have the best "fit" with the concerns and interests of the business class.

The power of the bosses' institutions, and the need for workers to accommodate to these institutions in normal times, means that in such times many workers tend not to challenge the dominant ideas of capitalist society: the companies' need for profit, the right of management to

run the plants, patriotic support for the bosses' government, the advantages of "free" enterprise and so on.

Many of the participants in the sit-down strikes might have accepted these elements of the system in the abstract, if they had been queried in the privacy of their home by a journalist from the *Detroit Free Press* even though their action in seizing the plant contradicts the values of the system. A revolutionary conception is implicit in the workers' action, even if it has not yet been clearly worked out in their thinking. Antonio Gramsci characterized this sort of contradiction in these terms:

> This conflict between thought and action, that is, the co-existence of two conceptions of the world, one affirmed in words and the other explaining itself in effective actions, is not always due to bad faith. Bad faith…is not a satisfactory explanation when the contrast shows itself in the life of large masses: then it cannot be other than the expression of more profound contradictions of an historical and social order. It means that a social group, which has its own conceptions of the world, even though embryonic (which shows itself in actions, and so only spasmodically, occasionally, that is, when such a group moves as an organic unity) has, as a result of intellectual subordination and submission, borrowed a conception which is not its own from another group, and this it affirms in words. And this borrowed conception it also believes it is following, because it does follow it in normal times, when its conduct is not independent and autonomous but precisely subordinate and submissive. (The Modern Prince, p.61)

The heightened cohesion and broader solidarity of a period of upsurge gives working people the power to ake changes. But in many cases these high points of past struggle did not lead to a revolutionary climax, to workers actually challenging the employers for control of the society.

Workers may have felt that they did not have the power to pursue more far-reaching changes. If so, a more protracted struggle against the system will seem too risky and lose support among the workforce. As the employers respond to increased worker power with concessions, many workers become more willing to accept a compromise, to sign a contractual agreement. As gains are made higher wages, more respect from supervisors, and so on some workers may feel that they have achieved much of what they wanted and feel less motivated to pursue further struggle.

In addition to periods of upheaval, when the big surges in unionism have occurred, there have also been long periods when relative calm has returned to relations between the workforce and the employing class, such as the long period of growth, and increases in relative prosperity, during the '50s and '60s. Bureaucracy tends to dominate the labor movement during these normal periods. The lowered level of rank-and-file participation and solidarity shifts the balance of power to the advantage of the employers. The employers thus have more power to exact concessions from labor organizations. The pressures of maintaining and administering an ongoing contractual relationship with the employers in such an environment tends to encourage the development of top-down hierarchy in unions.

In making contractual compromises, the employers respond to the power that workers developed during high points of struggle. But the employers' concessions higher wages, restrictions on management actions, etc. – are not without cost to the companies. Thus, capital will tend to agree to a compromise only if it can get concessions in return.

Moreover, the employers will be reluctant to enter into this contractual bargain if they are not confident that the union will carry out its side of the deal. The bosses will prefer to deal with an organization run by responsible officials who will compel membership to adhere to the contract.

The employers want labor peace in exchange for contractual compromises, and this has typically meant the requirement that the union avoid direct disruption of work in response to daily discontents and grievances. The result was no-strike clauses and various forms of mediation, grievance boards and such, which remove the grievance from the shop floor and place it in the hands of officials. It thus becomes less likely that a grievance will become a mass event to be dealt with directly and collectively by a group of people who work together. In the post-World War IIUSAa sharp distinction was thus developed between contract administration i.e. processing grievances and negotiation of new contracts, and the disruption of work was increasingly restricted to contract struggles, which occur at predictable times.

The daily conditions of work in a situation of being subject to management power and exploitation naturally leads to discontent and grievances which might provoke direct protest by the workers. If an organization were merely an association of workers on the job, and was not subject to external control, such an organization would tend to respond directly to the immediate concerns and moods of the workers. But an organization that is apt to unleash actions that disrupt production at any time is not a good candidate for a stable bargaining relationship with management and is likely to encounter intransigent opposition from the employers.

This does not mean that organizations run directly by the workers themselves could not be maintained. Bureaucratic control is not inevitable. But during normal times the low level of rank-and-file participation, and the pressures of maintaining contractual relationships, tends to facilitate a larger role for officials.

When the mass of union members have little or no interest in participating in the process of discussion and decision-making, except perhaps during an occasional major strike or contract negotiation, rank-and-file control of those who hold responsible positions, and of the evolution of the union, becomes more difficult.

Organizations run directly by the workers themselves, however, are more likely to emerge and grow during periods of heightened struggle and broader solidarity. During such a period employers may have no choice but to accept such organizations even though they would prefer a top-down union with responsible officials who will work to direct worker discontent into elections to decide who runs the bosses' governmental machinery, bureaucratic grievance procedures and other channels that are less disruptive than direct action.

The greater power that working people have during periods of mass upsurge also tends to make ideas of radical change seem more relevant. Insofar as workers develop a more radical conception of the goals and methods of unionism, this will tend to sustain mass participation. If the struggle is linked with goals of far-reaching changes in one's life, this provides more of a motive for getting involved.

On the other hand, during "normal" times, when workers are more likely to expect only minor adjustments in the worker/employer relationship – a few cents an hour more, some restrictions on what supervisors can do, etc. – they will often conclude that they would rather devote their time and energy to things other than meetings and controversies that have such a small impact on their lives.

During "normal" times the lower level of worker participation and restricted scope of struggles places sharp limits on the leverage workers have in conflicts with the employing class. The

pressures of maintaining a contractual compromise with the employers in such a period tends to encourage the development of hierarchy in labor organizations. That's because the requirement of maintaining labor peace can be carried out most effectively when there are officials in a labor organization who are insulated from rank-and-file pressure.

If officials had to work under the same conditions as rank-and-file members of the union, if they could be removed at any time by members of the organization, if discontents and grievances were dealt with collectively and directly by people on the job, if negotiations with employers were controlled at all stages by meetings of the ranks, this would leave little room for effective action by officials to concoct or enforce unpopular deals.

To be able to make the sorts of agreements that the employers are prepared to grant, there will be a tendency for officials to work at increasing their own control and restricting rank-and-file control in the union.

Separation from the rank-and-file

In this country this had led to the development of full-time paid positions, longer terms of office, top offices that are not elected directly by the rank-and-file, removing grievance settlement from the shopfloor, clauses in constitutions that permit full-time officials to impose dictatorships (called "trusteeships") over rebellious local groups, requiring sanction of officials for solidarity actions, and even taking away the right to vote on contracts in some cases (for example, in the United Steelworker union).

The officials will tend to emphasize the importance of their own "special skills" as negotiators and representatives. The bureaucratic mentality develops out of the "special activities" of the officials, in their unique interests, which are not the same as those of the rank-and-file. This becomes particularly pronounced when officials no longer work in the shop but take on full-time, paid positions.

Full-time officials no longer share the conditions of work of the membership. Conditions may exist that threaten the lives or health of people on the job, but such conditions will not have such immediate relevance to paid officers. It should not be surprising, then, that entrenched union officers do not view proposed agreements with management in the same way as rank-and-filers.

The management actions that might prompt workers to direct protest do not directly affect the full-time officials. To defend their conditions, to exercise some control in the work situation, workers seek out the support and collective action of their fellow workers. But the personal situation of the paid officials doesn't hinge so directly on mobilizing direct solidarity of fellow workers to counter management power.

The emphasis upon the special activities of the officials, their "leadership" and negotiating "skills", and the concern for their prestige and career in the union, can develop also among unpaid officials, not just full timers. To foster the dependence of the workforce on their leadership, officials may tend to tightly control information, and reduce the opportunities for rank-and-file members gaining experience in negotiating and other areas.

In the AFL-CIO type unions the "internationals" hold many trump cards in dealing with unpaid officers of local unions, such as control over strike funds, control of grievances taken to higher levels , support (or at least neutrality) and re-election, and (as a last resort) the threat

of a trusteeship. The "international" unions also provide the prospects of eventual promotion to full-time staff position — for those who show loyalty to the hierarchy.

Frank Marquart provides an example of this corrupting influence at work in the United Auto Workers union:

> A man I will call X… won the respect of the workers in his shop district … [and] served successively as line steward, chief steward, and committeeman. In the early days he was firmly convinced that a conflict of interest existed between the local and international union and he always stood four-square on the side of the local union. In the presence of fellow workers he often did announce the internationals officers and representatives for their wishy-washy attitude when negotiating speedup grievances which the local plant committee could not settle because management remained adamant … He eventually was elected a delegate to the international UAW…convention, where he mingled with the international representatives who once worked in the shop like himself but now followed an altogether different lifestyle. He knew that those representatives earned at least 2 ½ times as much money as he did, they did not have to submit to factory discipline, breath in factory pollution, eat indigestible food from factory lunch wagons, and they always wore white-collar clothes instead of work clothes. He felt that he too was qualified to perform the duties of an international representative…
>
> So X decided to "play his cards right"… When attending union meetings, X overlook no opportunity to speak in support of the policies of the hierarchy. And he bitterly attacked anyone from the opposition…. He knew that the more he proved his loyalty to the machine, the better his chances of getting on the international payroll. He remembered how convention delegates from his local union were rewarded for betraying their local's instructions. At a pre-convention local meeting, the membership voted to instruct their delegates to vote against…a dues increase. But when the delegates went to the convention the regional director met with a number of them and persuaded them to ignore their local's instructions and vote in favor of the dues increase. One of those delegates was a committeeman, highly regarded by his constituents, but when they heard how he violated the locals instructions they immediately called a meeting and voted to recall him. Soon after this happened he was appointed to the UAW international staff as a representative.
>
> X knew that if you wanted to "get ahead", he must never voice opposition to any UAW policy, no matter how much he personally disagreed with it… For such loyalty…, X was awarded a job on the international union staff. (An Auto Worker's Journal, pp. 107–108)

No matter what their particular ideology is, the officials who run the hierarchical unions will generally work to contain struggles within the framework of their on-going contractual relationship with the employers, and will work to avoid the outbreak of direct struggle. There are two reasons for this:

- To avoid risks to the organization they are responsible for, the organization that provides the basis for their career and prestige.

- To maintain their control or the labor movement. Direct action by workers lessens the role of the officials; if workers were to conduct struggles directly themselves, what need would there be for the officials?

For the same reasons, the officials will be antagonistic to independent organization and initiatives taken directly by the workers themselves. For, if workers are themselves organized on the job, this direct solidarity will better enable them to oppose management and initiate direct action, such as slowdowns or wildcat strikes. Such independent actions undermine the officials control over the labor movement and may lead to management reprisals that could be costly to the union organization.

To the extent that they can get away with it, officials will tend to protect the union by pursuing a policy designed to achieve acceptance in the eyes of the employers. This requires endless concessions to management. The officials will justify their actions in their own minds by confusing the interest of the organization with the interests of the workers.

In making concessions to management, and working to avoid worker direct action and militant confrontations with the bosses, the officials aim to avoid management reprisals. In protecting the existence of the organization, their rationalization is that this is also protecting the interests of the membership. Though a union organization is only a value to workers insofar as it could serve as a vehicle for their collective interests, the tendency of officials is to regard the organization as an end in itself, since their own special role and career depends upon.

But just because officials tend towards a policy of accommodation, this does not mean they will always be able to successfully enforce such a policy. To the extent that workers themselves are organized and act together "in union", to the extent traditions of local militancy and democratic participation have not eroded, the officials may be limited in their ability to sell out rank and file interests in order to maintain the safety of "their" organization.

C. Wright Mills once described the union bureaucracy as "managers of discontent". Instead of merely opposing worker protest, they aim to channel it away from disruptive direct action and into bureaucratic grievance procedures and electoral politics.

To be able to carry this out, they try to maintain the allegiance of the membership. They can do this most effectively when management is willing to make concessions.

Will the Bureaucrats "Move Left"?

Employers have been more willing to grant concessions to labor during periods of rapid growth – such as the 50s and 60s – when high profits make it easier for employers to buy labor peace. But since the early 70s the economy has been stagnating. Many industries have been plagued by periods of too much production capacity around the world to keep profits from falling. This makes for tougher competition for restricted markets. Employers are, thus, prompted to take a tougher stance toward organized workers.

A widespread employers offensive has picked up steam in the 70s and 80s and the unions have been under pressure for endless concessions. In their drive to cut down wages and conditions, and to break the unions if they get in the way, the employers' offensive threatens the very institutions that the labor bureaucracy depend on. When the leaders can't get concessions from the employers to market to the rank and file, this discredits the leadership in the eyes of the membership. The

plant shutdowns, mass layoffs and union busting have drastically cut union membership, thus eroding the financial base of the bureaucrats operations.

The situation has lead a number of American leftists – from former Maoists to social democratic reformers – to take the position that we should support the "left wing" of the union bureaucracy – the leaders who talk more militant or leftist. The idea is that the employers offensive will force the union leaders to initiate a fight back, more radical criticism of the system, mobilize the masses of numbers, or at least facilitate this, in order to protect their own organizations. Though this motion of the bureaucrats may be limited it will provide an opening so the argument goes, for advocates of more fundamental change to provide the developing movement with a more radical vision.

Here is it typical statement of this viewpoint:

> William Winpisinger, the most outspoken top labor official, is from the machinist union. Whether or not you're for Winpsinger's social democratic version of welfare state capitalism, when he gets on national TV and calls himself a socialist it's an eye opener for most workers …. While Winpsinger's "socialism" doesn't challenge capitalism, it does offer a broad program of social reformism, which goes beyond the narrow economic demands of business unionism ….
>
> In today's labor movement this reformism plays a mainly a positive role. The question of the political independence of labor, a limited criticism of capitalism, the questioning of a bit of that investment policies and the rights of communities, all these and more are positive directions from the social democratic wing of the union hierarchy. This shouldn't imply that the left should simply tail after social democracy and withhold criticism. Vacillation, talking tough with no action, sellouts on shopfloor issues, all these and more are well known problems when dealing with social democrats. But in today's conditions there is still good ground for a working relationship to help move labor in a left direction …[2]

This viewpoint, however, fails to understand the nature of the union bureaucracy, and the role that electoral politics plays in the labor movement.

The official hierarchy that presides over the labor movement has become entrenched and divorced from the rank and file during the long periods of capitalist stability and lower levels of workers struggle. The prevailing setup of contractual and legal relations between bosses and workers represents the accumulated class compromises from earlier periods of struggle. The labor bureaucracy exists to administer this class compromise. These compromises may have represented gains for workers in the past. The problem is that they also imposed various limitations upon carrying the struggle further – no- strike clauses, injunctions against mass picketing, laws against sympathy action ("secondary boycotts"), and so on. In working to keep workers' actions within the limits of the prevailing contractual and legal relationships, the officials play an essentially conservative rule. Rather than mobilizing the rank and file for action, officials of the AFL-CIO type unions have preferred a strategy of minimizing their losses by avoiding all out confrontations with the employers.

[2] Jerry Harris, The Changing Face of Labor, pp. 24, 29. This pamphlet was published by the Federation of Revolutionary Socialists, the remnant of the Communist Party (Marxist-Leninist), a pro-China group.

The Role of Electoral Politics

The importance of electoral politics is that it functions as a *substitute for direct action*. In channeling worker protest into voting, the officials can appear to be pursuing workers' interests while avoiding the risks and disruptions of direct struggle. The bureaucracy does not have an identity of interests with the rank-and-file. On the one hand, the existence and stability of the union organization is threatened by arrogant and profit-hungry employers who are led to attack workers' wages and conditions in their competitive struggle to prosper in the marketplace.

Yet, on the other hand, mass membership involvement and direct action weakens the role of officials in the labor movement and leads to risky confrontations with the bosses and the government. Caught between these two forces, the union bureaucracy seeks a "neutral" outside agency that can control the employers, minimize the vicious effects of competition, and this protect worker interests within the system without the risky and "uncontrollable" results of mass worker activity. This is why the union bureaucracy tends to be attracted to a social-democratic ideology of state regulation of capitalism.

Yet, this ideology is unrealistic. The state is certainly not "neutral" in the struggle between classes. It can *appear* independent of the employers, however, because it is not directly controlled by any one particular employer or faction of the business class. Moreover, it has separate institutional identity and decision-making system (elections, legislatures, courts, etc.).

The independence of any particular employer reflects the fact that the function of the State is to synthesize the interests of all the bosses, and regulate the overall workings of the system in the interests of the business class as a whole.

The State's existence as an institution of the bosses is shown by the various mechanisms that insulate the state from control by the working class – unelected Judges at the Federal level, huge unelected bureaucracies, absence of mass assemblies of the populace to control what government representatives do, no provisions for recall at the Federal level, long terms of office for top posts, etc. This becomes clearest during strikes, when court injunctions and police strike-breaking show which class the State is responsive to.

To channel worker discontent away from direct action in the workplaces to the legislative arena is thus to remove it from direct control by working people and relocate it where workers have less direct leverage. In a direct confrontation with supervision on the shopfloor, management is out-numbered by workers, and management is deprived of the cooperation from the workforce that is essential if the employer's operations are to continue. In the halls of Congress, state legislatures, courtrooms or Labor Board hearings, on the other hand, advocates of worker interests have no such numerical superiority or direct leverage.

There are various American leftists who look to the formation of a labor party as a way of advancing the struggle for social change. However, the European labor parties are – like the union bureaucracies – part of the bureaucratic residue left from past periods of upsurge in those countries. The mass labor parties in Europe emerged after intense periods of struggle in the 19th and early 20th centuries had heightened workers' sense of a conflict of interests with the bosses and thus led to the liberal business parties (the European equivalent of the Democratic Party in this country) losing credibility among working people.

Like the union bureaucracy, the functioning of the labor parties does not work towards change of the basic way society is organized but seeks organizational survival *within* the capitalist system. This accommodation to the system is not accidental but would tend to happen to

any mass political party that pursues positions of responsibility in the bosses' state through the electoral arena.

The bureaucratic nature of such parties can be seen if we consider that it would be even more difficult for working people to control elected representatives (and other labor party leaders) than it is to control the bureaucratic unions.

People vote only every several years. Voters only determine who gets to hold office, not what legislation should be passed, or what the party will actually do. There are not mass meetings of working people in the various districts between elections that the representatives must answer to. Political parties do not provide a framework for the direct participation of the mass of society's workforce, which unionism can do, at least at the high points of struggle. Direct participation in the actual activities of the labor political party is always limited to a small minority of people.

On the other hand, even the bureaucratic unions are more genuine mass organizations than political parties. These is mass participation in activities such as strikes and mass meetings at which negotiating proposals are discussed and contract votes are conducted. Of course, the union bureaucracy tries to manipulate these events but they are mass events, nonetheless, and the union hierarchy is only one factor. Workers are often able to exert some direct control on what the bureaucracy can do: unacceptable contracts may be voted down, unauthorized on-the-job actions such as slowdowns may take place, and so on. But rank and file workers have no such avenues for exerting day-to-day pressures on labor political parties.

Two Sides to Bureaucratic Unionism

The term "union" originated because workers took action "in union" with each other in opposition to the discontents of work subject to boss power and exploitation. But today the unions are not merely associations of workers that rely on the willingness of workers to support each other in day-to-day dealings with employers.

Rather, the AFL-CIO-type "international" unions today are more like a social service agency controlled at the top by professional bureaucracies, just as a Health Maintenance Organization or other social service agency is. Their contractual relations with the employers provide workers with a kind of "job insurance", and the processing of grievances is rather like a claim filed with your health insurance company.

The unions "represent" workers, and they do provide, especially at the local union level, a channel for worker protests and concerns. At the same time, they are committed to containing worker protest within the limits of the prevailing contractual and legal relationships with the employing class.

Their dual function reflects the fact that the legal, contractual relations with the bosses are a trade-off: Workers get certain concessions from management but workers are required to also make concessions and the unions are expected to make sure that the rank-and-file keep their part of the bargain.

In the process, the unions are turned into enforcers of "industrial discipline." If workers become fed up with ineffective grievance machinery or bureaucratic union inertia and begin to take direct action together, such as a wildcat strike or some other "unauthorized" action, the union officials may very well try to crush it.

The low level of worker participation in struggles during "normal" times makes it easier for the bureaucratic unions to function as the channel for workers' protest. During a time of labor upsurge, on the other hand, when rank-and-file participation becomes more widespread and workers begin to reach out across divisions, new organizations tend to emerge outside the framework of the older union structures which have become bureaucratized. That happens precisely because the top-down structures of such unions have made them unsuited to carrying the struggle beyond the "normal" channels of institutionalized dealings between unions and management. The creation of new organization thus becomes necessary as workers move to take over more direct control of their struggles with the employing class.

After a new upsurge begins to emerge, and stirrings at the base show signs of building a new movement outside the control of the existing labor officialdom, we *are* likely to see some of the officials break away "to the left", at least in rhetoric. But in giving lip service to the new concerns of the rank-and-file, their aim will be to contain the new stirrings within the limits of what they think the employing class will accept. That's because a fundamental purpose of the officialdom is preserving their organization as an institution within capitalist society.

A good example of officials "moving to the left" in response to an upsurge of rank-and-file activism is the rise of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) in the mid-1930s. I will discuss the rise of the CIO, and the consolidation of bureaucratic unionism during World War II, in the next issue.

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Tom Wetzel
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