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Democracy and Bureaucracy in the USWA

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Abstract
[Excerpt] America's labor movement is on the ropes, struggling for survival. Many of its leaders seem uncertain which way to turn, whom to trust or what to do to secure that survival. When they talk about organizing the unorganized, they think mainly in terms of how to replace the numbers they have lost in recent years. How did labor manage to sink so low after those glorious struggles of the 1930's and 40's that produced the CIO?

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America’s labor movement is on the ropes, struggling for survival. Many of its leaders seem uncertain which way to turn, whom to trust or what to do to secure that survival. When they talk about organizing the unorganized, they think mainly in terms of how to replace the numbers they have lost in recent years. How did labor manage to sink so low after those glorious struggles of the 1930’s and 40’s that produced the CIO?

Tony Mazzochi of OCAW explained it well when he said, “The problem with the labor movement is that it can’t accommodate dissent. Labor should be engaged in a most vigorous discussion, at the rank-and-file level, of fundamental questions that confront the nation: industrial change, capital investment, employment and unemployment. But it is not. Instead conformity is the order of the day.”

The United Steelworkers (USWA) is one of the most striking examples of this problem. After winning good contracts for a period of years, they have agreed to accept concessions in their most recent contract—concessions which some economists estimate will cost the average worker about $12,000 over the 41-month life of the contract.

The USWA accepted a pay cut of $1.25 an hour. The extended vacation plan, which was initiated to ease job loss in the industry, was scrapped. Vacation bonuses, one holiday and one week of vacation are gone. Sunday overtime has been reduced from time-

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and-a-half to time-and-a-quarter. And while the union was preparing its members to make all these sacrifices, U.S. Steel was negotiating a deal to import British steel slabs for finishing at its Fairless Works, a deal that will reduce U.S. Steel's productive capacity by 13 per cent and eliminate 3,000 American steelworkers' jobs.

The manner in which the union reached this decision is interesting. Last July President Lloyd McBride summoned the local union presidents to Pittsburgh, urging them to reach an early agreement with the companies to forestall the possibility of more lay-offs or plant closings. At that time both the local presidents and the International Executive Board rejected the companies' proposal. Concessions, they felt, should not be accepted without a fight or without some job guarantees from the companies.

By November, when McBride summoned them together again, the International Executive Board had been persuaded to vote for concessions, but the local presidents still rejected the proposal. Last March, after eight months of 'persuasion' from the International office, the local presidents succumbed and also accepted concessions.

In almost no time, several of them had cause to regret their decision. Albert Lupini, President of Local 4889 at Fairless Works, part of which will close down if U.S. Steel imports British steel slabs, is one of those who feel betrayed. He thought the concessions would guarantee American jobs. U.S. Steel insisted that President McBride had been aware of its negotiations with British Steel all along. McBride agreed that he had been aware of the negotiations, but he thought they would be dropped if the concessions were given. Having used the full force of the International
union to secure concessions, McBride then launched a war of newspaper ads against his once trusted adversary, U.S. Steel.

To one who has labored in the industry and the union, none of this comes as a surprise. It is the inevitable outcome of a union structure which provides the appearance but not the substance of democracy.

The initial structure of the USWA was designed to give the International union president an unprecedented amount of power and to inhibit membership input into the union’s decision-making process. Without this vital feedback from mill and shop floors, union officials lack a key ingredient for understanding what the companies are actually doing. They also lack an independent analysis of what labor needs and how to serve these needs. Accepting the basic premises of “free enterprise” in a blind fashion, they also accept most of the arguments of the corporations regarding their needs. As a result, they have become active agents for securing advantages for the corporations from both government and the labor force.

What aspect of union structure led to this kind of autocracy? Primarily there are three: the almost total appointive power of the International president, the role of the union staff representatives, and the unusual voting procedures at the union conventions. From these three bases other impediments to democratic unionism have sprung.

Powers of Appointment

The appointive power of the International president extends to all International employees except the International Executive Board. Elected by the membership at large, the Executive Board consists of the five top executive officers and the directors of each district.

The original executive board, with only three top officers, was elected by delegates at convention when the Steelworkers Organizing Committee transformed itself into the United Steelworkers of America in 1942. At that time Phil Murray appealed to the convention delegates to rubber-stamp his appointed organizers and to elect them as the first district directors. When some moved that the directors should be elected by the membership of each district, strong appeals were made to honor Murray’s great personal contributions to organizing the steelworkers. It was implied that failure to accept his suggestion was both a personal affront to Murray and a threat to union solidarity.*

* Proceedings: First Constitutional Convention, USWA, CIO, 1942.
Future district directors were elected by the union membership in each district. But should one ever be elected whose views differed from those of the International president, the union structure dictates which voice shall prevail within the district. The International president, not the district director, has the power to hire and fire not only all the sub-district directors and staff representatives in the district, but every secretary (excluding the director’s private secretary), every clerk and every janitor. Through control of all the subordinate officials and employees in the district, the International president can work around or even against any district director who displeases him.

The district directors and top union officers elected at the first USWA convention remained in office for long periods of time. When new directors were elected they always came from among the appointed International staff and needed the presidential “seal of approval.” This was not a legal requirement. Any union member in good standing could run for the district director’s position simply by obtaining a certain number of local union nominations, but local unions were generally reluctant to nominate from the ranks since they were directly dependent on the International-appointed staff men to service them. A staff representative—appointed by and loyal to the International president—might punish a local by skipping meetings he had promised to attend, or by failing to work closely with the local in developing special educational, safety or legislative programs. Worst of all, he might fail to move the grievances along to arbitration, might drop valid grievances or fail to fight hard for winnable cases. He could ignore complaints about shop conditions and let the boss simply have a free hand.

The greater risks to be borne were those of an aspiring director who had not first been appointed to the International staff. Job rights of local union officials in the steel industry are protected by contract, no matter how long they serve in an elected office. After 15 years as a local union official, a defeated candidate for local union office can return to the mill from which he came as an employee. But those who leave the steel mills to work on the International staff, whether appointed or elected to a position, retain their job rights in the plant for only two years.

By the mid-1960’s the staff men of the USWA had formed a union of their own. Once they passed a probationary period, during which they still retained job rights in their plants, they could not be fired from the staff without good cause. If they moved from an
appointed staff position to an elected one, they maintained their rights to return to a staff job.

A district director who comes straight from the ranks, on the other hand, has no job protection at all. He may have been president of a large local and he may have had much union leadership experience, but after two years as district director he loses his job rights in the mill and has none with the International. He may be appointed to a staff position if the International president so desires, but he may also be relegated to the scrap heap of unemployment as were Joseph Kender when he failed to win re-election as Director of District 28 in 1977 and James Balanoff, in District 31 in 1981.

Role of the Staff

Presidential control of all staff appointments not only increases the gap between leadership and membership. It also erodes the respect of the membership for the staff.

The International has tended to favor certain candidates in the larger locals and give them quiet support. When an International-favored candidate loses an election, he is likely to be offered a staff job. This continual rewarding of people who have been rejected by the membership is often seen by members as a display of contempt for their judgement. Staff jobs are also given to certain individuals for purely political reasons with little regard for skill, experience or leadership qualities. While many staff men are able and dedicated trade unionists, their ranks have been diluted over the years with many others who are merely ambitious and loyal to top leadership.

These staff men are crucial to the health of the union. They are the people who help the locals negotiate contracts. They have the power to withdraw grievances or push them on to arbitration. When they fail to function at a high level of expertise and dedication, union members suffer.

By the mid-1950's resentment of the use of staff men to create a union political machine had surfaced. It was expressed in two
ways: objections to all staff being appointed by the International president and objections to the role staff men played at conventions.

Staff men may be elected as delegates to the union convention from their home locals. More often they receive credentials from locals which they service and which are too small to afford to send a delegate to the convention. The staff’s expenses are paid by the International. Staff delegates may raise the issues that their people feel are in serious need of discussion, but they can also be extremely helpful in directing traffic to the microphone in such a way as to minimize complaints the leaders don’t want to hear.

By 1956 resolutions were appearing at convention to restrict the power of the International president to appoint the entire staff. Some wanted district directors to either recommend or appoint their own staff; more wanted the staff men elected by the members. These resolutions were often accompanied by a resolution that would permit a staff man to be removed from servicing a given local—either by petition or a vote of no confidence by the membership. There were remonstrances from the convention floor about staff men controlling the discussion, and from 1960 on there have been increasing numbers of resolutions to reduce the number of staff at the convention—either by requiring a guarantee that at least 75 per cent of the convention delegates be workers or that staff should be elected from their home locals.

At the most recent convention 19 resolutions were aimed at reducing the power of the staff at conventions. Other resolutions aimed at aiding small locals to pay for their own delegates to the convention also appeared with increasing frequency. While none of these resolutions ever pass, they are no longer countered by resolutions from other locals in defense of the status quo, as was the case when they first began.*

* In 1956 six resolutions were proposed to restrict the International President’s appointment of staff. Thirteen resolutions to the same effect were proposed at the following convention, but the International was obviously prepared to stem the tide for 90 resolutions asked for no change. Since resolutions must be submitted well before the convention, 90 resolutions in favor of the status quo would have to indicate an organized International campaign among the locals to undermine any possibility of change. But resolutions to end presidential appointment of all staff resumed in 1966, and increased thereafter.
Voting at Conventions

More subtle, but even more discouraging to real membership input into union affairs, is the complicated voting procedure at conventions.

Each local union is entitled to one delegate for the first 500 members or less in the local and one additional delegate for each additional 500 members or majority fraction thereof. Each convention delegate is entitled to one vote for the first 100 members or less in his union and one additional vote for each additional 100 members, or majority fraction thereof, but no one delegate may have more than 10 votes.*

The result of this provision is that the voting power of the delegates ranges from 1 to 10 votes per delegate. Thus, only a roll call vote can accurately reflect the membership the delegates represent. In a voice vote or a standing vote, each delegate is equal to any other.

One would expect that roll call votes would be automatic on most controversial issues, but none are ever taken. The requirements for getting a roll call vote are so difficult that roll call votes are unheard of.

In order to have a roll call vote, it must be requested by 30 per cent of the entire delegation to the convention.† This is not 30 per cent of those present on the convention floor at the time. It means 30 per cent of the entire delegation, which could well be over 50 per cent of those present at the time.

In the manner in which this clause has been interpreted,

* USWA Constitution, Article VI, Sec. 2.
† Ibid., Article VI, Sec. 15.
interpreted by International presidents, it actually means even more than 30 per cent of the total number of people in the delegation. The roll is prepared by the local unions, and any staff man who picks up credentials from more than one local will be listed separately with each local which has given him credentials. Each time he is listed, he is added to the total number of delegates as a separate individual. * We know of no other union that makes it so difficult to obtain a roll call vote.

To what extent does this voting procedure prevent the will of the membership from being accurately reflected in convention votes? It could be and probably is enormous!

After the 1974 convention we did an analysis of the voting strength of the delegates at that convention. We found that 4,327 credentials had been issued to delegates who carried 11,941 votes. Nearly half the credentials carried only one vote, the others carried anywhere from 2 to 10. The 30 per cent of the delegates who had the least amount of voting power would have registered 10.8 per cent of the vote in a roll call, but the 30 per cent who carried the highest amount of voting power would have registered 59.4 per cent.† Clearly it is possible for people who have more than 50 per cent of the voting power in a roll call vote to have too few bodies at the convention to meet the requirements to get a roll call.

Carried a bit further, that same analysis showed that the 50 per cent who had the least voting power would represent about 20 per cent of the vote in a roll call, while the 50 per cent with the greatest voting power would represent 80 per cent. Standing or shouting, however, the two groups are equal.

One wonders if any of the past convention votes have ever really reflected the will of the membership. One thing is clear: some of the strongest opposition to the International leadership has come from very large plants with high voting power per delegate.

Since 1966, resolutions from the membership have appeared fairly regularly to change this voting procedure.‡ Some have requested

* For the 1974 convention we checked the list of delegates for duplicate names and found that there were over 700 fewer delegates than the number of credentials issued.
† The lowest 30 percent carried one vote each. The top 30 per cent consisted of all the delegates with five or more votes plus 91 of those with four votes.
‡ The first resolution for a mandatory roll call vote on constitutional issues appears in the Proceedings for the 1958 Constitutional Convention. At the 1966 convention there was another resolution on roll call voting, 13 resolutions in 1968, 4 in 1970, 21 in 1976, 15 in 1978, 7 in 1980 and 5 in 1982.
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a mandatory roll call vote for all constitutional changes. Other frequent suggestions have been for lowering the roll call require­ment either to 10 per cent or to 30 per cent of the delegates on the convention floor. In the last decade increasing numbers of resolutions have requested electronic voting or the polling of each district’s vote by the district director. Given the present voting procedure, however, nothing is passable without either executive board support or total mobilization of the delegates.

**Tightening the Grip**

Despite all the built-in constitutional guarantees for a self-perpetuating union bureaucracy, there have been revolts from time to time, both palace revolts and attempted risings from the ranks. After each challenge, however, the International has moved to tighten its grip on the bureaucracy and to eliminate whatever possibilities remained for an active democratic life within the union.

A major rising from the ranks occurred in the late 1950s after David J. McDonald inaugurated a new era in USWA history, the era sometimes referred to as “tuxedo unionism.” McDonald opened the 1956 Los Angeles convention with a glowing speech about “people’s capitalism” and “mutual trusteeship” and ended it with a huge battle over raising union dues. Hostility to a dues increase was stimulated in part by a feeling that the old rough-and-rugged union leaders were being replaced by a new breed of professional bureaucrats, “business unionists,” and that the workers were being given the business.

There had been much discussion about technology displacing workers in the steel industry, and some union members felt their leaders were more concerned about keeping the union’s income sufficient to support the existing bureaucracy than they were about
the members' problems. Opposition to the dues increase was strongest among the lower paid workers, especially Blacks, and there was serious dissent at that convention.

One delegate, a relatively unknown grievor from Local 2227 in Pennsylvania, decided to keep the protesters together, build a national movement and run for International President of USWA. Don Rarick challenged McDonald for leadership and lost. He was subjected to intense public ridicule and hostility at the next two conventions, much of it coming from the podium. In the 1958 convention he was the object of a special resolution on dual unionism. Strong hints from top officials implied that he was, on the one hand, the tool of communists and, on the other, the tool of the steel corporations. At the 1960 convention he was physically attacked.

In 1962 Article V, Sec. 5 of the USWA constitution was amended to increase the number of nominations required to run for all International offices. This was an attempt to avert future challenges from the ranks. It placed a greater burden on aspiring office holders from the ranks, who lacked the wide contacts with numerous local unions that were available to staff men.

Expressions of dissent and distrust from the ranks continued through hundreds of convention resolutions to reduce the salaries of International officials or to force their retirement by a given age.

In a place revolt in 1965, I.W. Abel upset McDonald and promised to return the union to the rank and file. His first convention was open and friendly in tone, especially when compared to those run by his predecessor. But all the old requests for easing qualifications for running for International office or for roll call votes were glossed over, as Abel explained how tiresome and time consuming roll-call voting could be.

The next challenge, which led to a further tightening of the controls, was the presidential bid of Ed Sadlowski in 1977. Sadlowski had been president of a large local union at a very young age when he was appointed to the International staff, presumably to defuse him as a potential dissident. But he proved uncooperative, running against and beating the International-approved candidate for Director of District 31 in 1975.

In 1977 Sadlowski decided to oppose Lloyd McBride for International president when Abel retired. McBride was also a District Director, long favored by top union officials but not their first choice for the presidency. McBride had himself been engaged in a bit of a palace revolt, and he determined not to let it happen to him once he

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once he achieved the top office. Two years after Sadlowski's 
unsuccessful race for the presidency, new election rules were 
applied. These practically ensure that such a challenge will never 
occur again.

Section 27 was added to Article V of the constitution, forbidding 
candidates for any International position to accept financial 
support from anyone other than union members. It also provided 
for an elaborate, time-consuming financial report from each 
candidate and a committee to enforce the rules. Those who cannot 
use International business, with its accompanying expense 
account, to travel around the country to conduct their campaign 
now have a horrendous fund-raising task in order to mount a 
national campaign. These rules make it illegal for even wives or 
parents of steelworkers to contribute to their election or buy raffle 
tickets to support their campaign.

**Conclusion**

The USWA by general standards is a good union, a clean union 
without connections to organized crime. There are occasional 
assaults on union members at convention, especially on those who
have been denounced from the podium, but the union is not goon-ridden in comparison to some. USWA officials enjoy a high living standard, but many other unions offer a higher level of luxury to their leaders. The USWA’s failures are those of an entrenched bureaucracy—pettiness and complacency—made possible by a structure that offers it unusual protection from challenge from the membership.

The mentality of the big city political machine prevails throughout. Initiative is lacking in preparing for hard changes. The will to struggle has long been spent. The greatest failure of USWA leadership is its deference to corporate leaders, its willingness to trust them in the face of their constant duplicity. That one flaw, at least, might have been remedied if criticism from below had ever been viewed as legitimate instead of treasonous, or if the union structure had permitted some real power to local union members. But it is not inevitable that the labor movement continue on this self-destructive path. Change for the better is possible if leadership is provided and if channels are opened to mobilize that considerable amount of energy which frustration and hard times are generating among rank-and-file workers and the unemployed. For the steelworkers union, regeneration must begin with some basic structural changes to make the union reflect the real will of its elected representatives. Such changes might include:

- Regular roll call voting at convention, preferably by the use of electronic equipment. At the very minimum, roll call votes should be taken on all major policy questions and at the request of no more than 20 per cent of the delegates present on the convention floor.
- Equal access to all candidates for union office to district or national conferences and union publications.
- Decentralization of appointment power, allowing each district director to hire their own subordinates.
- Equal limitations on campaign expenditures for all candidates, by permitting union members to authorize deductions for political purposes to finance the printing and distribution of the programs of all candidates.
- Protection of the job rights of candidates elected from the ranks to the International Executive Board.
- Referendum vote on all union contracts.
Addition of a Spanish language section to Steel Labor, the International newspaper, to make sure that all basic information is equally available to Spanish-speaking union members.

Such changes would permit a great flow of energy and information from the ranks to top union leadership, but they need to be accompanied by another effort—an effort to develop a labor-oriented brain trust, skilled technicians and intellectuals who know how to do hard research, who could free the labor movement from so much dependence on corporations for their information and their plans. Most major unions already have a number of such people on their staffs, but they are generally as stifled and frustrated in their work as the mill workers they try to serve. Colleges have many idealistic young people today who would flock to a revitalized labor movement as they flocked to the CIO in the 1930’s.

Last, but by no means least, the American labor movement needs to return to its original premise: ORDINARY PEOPLE MATTER! They cannot be discarded like old rags or scrap metal. And those who propose to lead them must be prepared to develop a new industrial policy for the nation as a whole, prepared to move whatever mountains need to be moved in order to feed, educate and develop our nation’s children and maintain the dignity and self-respect of our adult population. If this means 6-hour workdays at full pay, national legislation to control the export of capital, or a whole complex of changes that fly in the face of our normal manner of doing business, labor leaders must be willing and able to help our nation understand the inevitability of change and the desirability of collectively controlling its course for the common good.