

Growth of Social Consciousness in Internal Union Affairs

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WHAT IS THE SCOPE and nature of the union's responsibility to the public in the conduct of its internal affairs? To a large measure that responsibility is derivative. The union must conduct its internal affairs so as to meet its public responsibility in collective bargaining and in political or community activities. It is necessary, therefore, to make articulate what seem to be the sources of public responsibility in those areas, particularly as they relate to internal union affairs. Apart from this, unions have a more general responsibility which grows out of the fact that they are a large and significant social institution functioning within a democratic society.

Internal Affairs and Bargaining

Collective bargaining is an established and fundamental feature of our way of life. This national policy was woven from three separate strands, each of which has implications for the unions' public responsibility in internal affairs. First, collective bargaining was conceived, at the most elementary level, as an economic mechanism to give the individual workman effective bargaining power against large combinations of capital. This strand of policy views unions simply as economic instruments to obtain for workers their fair share of the fruits of their labor. To fulfill this policy, the unions' public duty is to be internally strong.

The second strand consists of collective bargaining as an institution for regulating the labor market without the evils of unchecked employer power or smothering government control. Nearly 20 years before the Wagner Act was passed, the U.S. Commission on Industrial Relations recommended such legislation, saying, "One of the most important facts to be recognized is that government . . . cannot be looked to alone for remedying evil conditions. As soon as people look upon

the coercive power of government as the only means of remedying abuses, then the struggle of government is substituted for the private initiative through private associations, from which the real substantial improvements must come."

Similarly, the underlying philosophy of the Wagner Act was to create a structure for regulating terms and conditions of employment which would protect the workers' interests with a minimum of government intervention. This serves the vital political function of creating centers of power and instruments of control apart from the State so that the State does not become unmanageable or dangerously large. It distributes power, furthers our principle of political pluralism, and thereby protects our freedom from an all-enveloping state. This strand of national policy, which views collective bargaining as a system of private government, imposes on unions the obligation to temper self-interest with public interest.

The third strand of our national policy seeks to encourage unionization and promote collective bargaining as an extension of our democratic process. As stated by the Industrial Commission of 1898, "By the organization of labor and by no other means, it is possible to introduce an element of democracy into the government of industry. By this means, only can workers effectively take part in determining the conditions under which they work." In 1916, the U.S. Commission on Industrial Relations declared, "The struggle of labor for organization is not merely to secure an increased measure of the material comforts of life, but is a part of an agelong struggle for liberty . . . Even if men were well fed, they would still struggle to be free."

The implications of this policy for internal union affairs is painfully clear. Union members must have an effective voice in making decisions concerning collective bargaining. This includes the right to know the facts and understand the real policies; it includes the right to criticize policies and the officers who implement them, without fear or restraint; and it includes the effective power to change policies and choose new officers. The national policy on industrial democracy imposes on unions the public responsibility of internal democracy.

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These three strands of policy impose three measures of responsibility on the union in the conduct of its internal affairs. It must be internally strong so as to be effective in protecting the worker's economic interest. It must be internally responsible so as to use its economic power in the public interest. It must be internally democratic so as to make real the worker's right of self-government. This brings into sharp focus the problem: can a union be economically effective and socially responsible and, at the same time, internally democratic?

First, can unions be both effective and democratic? It is argued that internal democracy creates factionalism and disunity, dissipating the union's energies and destroying its ability to present a common front to the employer. John L. Lewis bluntly declared, "It is a question whether you desire your organization to be the most effective instrumentality . . . or whether you prefer to sacrifice the efficiency of your organization for a little more academic freedom." The choice, however, is not whether there shall be disagreement within the union, for this is an inevitable product of diverse interests. The choice is what process shall be used to temper and resolve such internal conflicts.

Disruption and disunity follow when criticism is treated as disloyalty and opposition is equated to revolution, for this transforms the internal dispute into a struggle for survival. If union leaders and members genuinely accept the democratic process, open debates and contests for office within do not lessen its unity when challenged from without. It is the refusal to accept the legitimacy of opposition which creates destructive factionalism and breaks the common front.

Second, can unions in collective bargaining be both socially responsible and internally democratic? It is argued that decisions required in collective bargaining are not appropriate for the democratic process. In part, this rests on the fear that if bargaining is constantly subjected to political pressures, union officers in the grasping for votes will make unrealistic demands and process worthless grievances. This may lead to fruitless strikes, destruction of the employer, and ultimate frustration of the bargaining process itself. This danger is real, for the democratic

process does not automatically convert selfish men into selfless citizens, nor is responsibility always rewarded at the polls. However, lack of democracy does not automatically produce selfless leaders. Perhaps union leaders who were not answerable to the members could be more responsible to the public, but the critical question is whether they would. Democracy does not guarantee responsible leadership, but an authoritarian system promises even less.

The argument that collective bargaining is not appropriate for the democratic process rests also on the belief that union members are not capable of understanding the complicated problems involved. The economics of the industry, the mechanics of the production process, the comparative wages of workers in other industries—these and the many other considerations which determine bargaining policy are claimed to be beyond the members' grasp. This, too, is a half truth, for the members do not sit at the bargaining table but act through representatives. The question is whether those who do sit at the table shall be answerable to the membership. Even so, the members must give instructions and judge the results, and this requires that they have some measure of knowledge and understanding.

Internal union democracy will not, of course, guarantee that unions will be economically strong and socially responsible. The democratic process in unions, no more than in government, will bring in the millenium, for it will falter and make mistakes. The limited claim here is that, for all its imperfections, it offers equal or greater promise than any alternative method of conducting union affairs.

This all might be dismissed as professional theorizing, but it has some factual support. Historically, democratic unions have demonstrated an ability to withstand the most bitter strikes and win benefits for their members. There is, in fact, a substantial correlation between the union's devotion to the democratic process and its sense of broad social responsibility. There are exceptions, and the best authoritarian union may be stronger and more responsible than the worst democratic union, but this falls far short of proving that unions cannot be democratic and at the same time economically effective and socially responsible.

Internal Affairs and Political Action

The second branch of our problem is: how shall the union conduct its internal affairs so as to meet its public responsibility in political action?

The democratic process functions effectively only when there is vigorous debate and effective public presentation of all points of view. To make sensible judgments, the electorate must have an opportunity to know the facts and understand the competing considerations. As a practical matter, public debate can be carried out effectively in our modern society of mass communication only with the aid of organized groups, each representing its special interests. Union political action, by broadening and enlivening the public forum, contributes a much needed vitality to that process.

The democratic process, however, does not end with debate, but must move on to decisions, and it is imperative that those decisions seek to reconcile and compromise the conflicting and divergent interests. When reconciliation is impossible, the decision gains acceptance and compliance by those who are disappointed only if they have confidence that all considerations have been fully weighed. The union, as spokesman for the workers' interests, makes the whole community aware of the felt needs of this significant sector which might otherwise remain voiceless. Union political action thus removes the sources of festering dissatisfaction, and is a part of the mortar which gives our democratic society strength.

The union, however, can fulfill this function only if it represents the real feelings and desires of its members. The political policies of the union must be determined by the democratic process within the union. If those policies are dictated by the leaders, the public cannot know what weight to give to the claims asserted and may grossly miscalculate the weight to be given them.

The union's public responsibility in political action goes beyond expressing the views of a majority of its members, but includes a heavy obligation to recognize the rights of dissenting minorities. All of the constructive values of political action by interest groups are weakened and all of the dangers are multiplied to the extent that coercive measures are used to bind persons to support political policies with which they dis-

agree. Employers ought not be able to compel employees to contribute campaign funds, distribute literature, or keep silent their views even when the employer believes his continued existence is at stake. Neither should a union be able to conscript the money, time, or verbal support of members who disagree.

The union in collective bargaining speaks for the workers, and participation in this industrial government depends on union membership. For a union to expel a member because of his political activity—even campaigning for a "right-to-work" law—is to insist that he surrender either his political or his industrial franchise. To compel an employee to contribute to a candidate's campaign—or to use his dues for this purpose—is to exact a poll tax payable to one of the political contestants. Such measures repudiate public responsibility, for they obstruct and distort the democratic process.

The limits which unions, sensitive to their public responsibilities, should impose on their use of union funds and facilities for political action are extremely difficult to define. The line between educational and political programs is indistinct, though somewhat clearer than some unions pretend. The union has institutional interests it should advocate and for which it should use institutional funds. However, no matter how wide the limits, they should not include the silencing of any member in freely expressing his views in the public forum or the exacting of compulsory contribution to a candidate's campaign fund. No matter how narrow the limits, the democratic process within the union should be preserved so that every member will have a voice in determining political policies.

Responsibility for Democratic Spirit

The union has a responsibility to the public which extends beyond those obligations derived from its collective bargaining function or its political activity.

A democratic government does not thrive on sterile soil or in a hostile climate, for it is less the product of a constitutional form than an expression of a democratic spirit. Such a spirit may wither unless it is nourished by democratic practices in all branches of society. If people come

to expect organizations such as unions not to be democratic, they may well cease to expect their government to be democratic. If denial of due process is accepted in industry, it may cease to be cherished in the courts. If discrimination and segregation are tolerated in unions, they will be slow to disappear in the schools.

This responsibility rests especially heavy on unions. In sheer size, the labor movement is one of the largest organized private groups in the country. More important, the unions through bargaining exercise regulatory power; their agreements establish the law of the plant; and their grievance procedure provides the administrative and judicial process of the plant. This governmental quality of labor power functions inevitably means that its internal practices will have the greatest impact on its members' attitudes toward what are proper practices in government.

This responsibility cannot be evaded by pointing fingers of shame at others, whether they be corporations, professional societies, or political parties. This may obscure or divert the issue, but it does not alter the responsibility of the union. The very failure of other groups makes the union's contribution all the more critical. If unions, which were born of democratic ferment and which are pledged to the principles of freedom and democracy, fail in their practices to observe basic democratic rights, then where shall the democratic spirit find sustenance?

This kind of public responsibility unions well understand, for most of them have faced and accepted it in the area of racial discrimination. Although hard cores of prejudices remain within the labor movement, unions have for 20 years led the way in combating discrimination and segregation. By their example, they have done perhaps as much or more than any other single

group to nourish and strengthen in our social conscience the democratic principle of equality.

In other critical areas, unions can contribute to creating a climate for the democratic process by rededicating themselves to practicing internal democracy. Constitutions can be stripped of all provisions which repress criticism or open debate, and freedom of expression can be affirmatively guaranteed. Unions should root out all attitudes that dissent is evidence of disloyalty, and cultivate recognition of the legitimacy of opposition.

Similarly, unions could add needed strength to our insistence on due process. Union judicial proceedings could be revised so as to guarantee to every member a full hearing before an unbiased tribunal. Summary penalties could be abandoned, subjecting the accused to an appeal after he had been acquitted could be eliminated, and impartial review boards could replace the politically selected union tribunals. Unions might also eliminate dangerously vague discipline clauses such as those prohibiting "disruption" or "conduct unbecoming a union member."

In at least one other respect, union democracy feeds the democratic process in government. If union members are to participate in determining policies in collective bargaining, they must be taught the facts of industrial life and given an understanding of the economic problems involved. If union members are to decide the political policies of the union, they must know and understand the political issues involved. Therefore, if unions unreservedly resolve to be internally democratic, they must equally resolve to educate their members in order that those decisions will be as wise as possible. In educating their members, however, they are also educating citizens, for the same information and understanding is required by voters to make sound political decisions.