

UNION DEMOCRACY IN TODAY'S LABOR MOVEMENT

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Introduction

Any discussion of union democracy should begin with the obvious: labor unions are the most important vehicle to defend workers' rights in the world. The world would be a far better place if every worker who wanted to could, without fear, join a labor union. Unions negotiate better wages and benefits than comparable non-union workers receive. Unions bring some element of democracy into an otherwise undemocratic workplace where the boss has unlimited power. A union grievance procedure brings a version of the Bill of Rights' sixth amendment into the workplace – a worker accused of doing something wrong has due process rights.

Unions advocate values in the workplace such as justice, fairness, safety, and respect. Polls show that around half of American workers would join a union if they were free to do so – four and a half times the number who are currently members.¹ Over the past century, unions have fought for every U.S. law benefitting workers. As well, unions are one of the most democratic institutions in America, and unions are among the most interracial organizations in America.²

Yet American unions are not perfect models of democracy. While all unions have constitutions and by-laws that outline democratic procedures, there is a tremendous range of democracy within the labor movement. The bulk of labor unions are somewhere on a spectrum between completely democratic, member-driven, transparent unions, and bureaucratic, top-down, secretive unions with no member involvement. Democracy is a goal. Democracy is not something a union achieves, congratulates itself, and then forgets about. Democracy, in a country or in a labor union, is not achieved by just passing good laws or rules. No set of rules,

¹ A 2011 Fox News-commissioned poll of registered voters found that 43% answered that they would like to be in a union; see www.pollingreport.com. A 2017 MIT survey found that 48% of the non-union workforce would vote for a union: Thomas Kochan, William Kimball, Duanyi Yang and Erin L. Kelly, "Voice Gaps at Work, Options for Closing Them, and Challenges for Future Actions and Research," MIT Sloan School of Management, Institute for Work and Employment Research, working paper, June 2018. 29 USC 151, at <https://mitsloan.mit.edu/shared/ods/documents/?PublicationDocumentID=5437>. As well, 48% of non-union workers answered "yes" to wanting to be in a union in a 2018 PBS/National Opinion Research Corporation poll, "A growing number of Americans want to join a union," September 3, 2018 at

<https://www.pbs.org/newshour/nation/a-growing-number-of-americans-want-to-join-a-union>

² See, for example, David Madland, Malkie Wall, Danielle Root, "Unions Are Democratically Organized, Corporations Are Not," October 16, 2020 Center for American Progress, at <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/economy/reports/2020/10/16/491731/unions-democratically-organized-corporations-not/>

no constitution, no by-laws, and no elections guarantee union democracy. Democracy is achieved by continual struggle to maintain it and to expand it. Democracy is maintained by the people holding elected leaders accountable for their actions.

There is a dark side to being in power, whether as an elected politician or as an elected union officer. Power can be an addiction. It is easy to slowly begin to abuse your power. It is easy to fall into a way of thinking that your old self would have thought unthinkable.

While America prides itself on being a democratic country, the political culture in America leans far more heavily toward the benefits of holding power than to the ideals of democracy. In both the Republican and Democratic parties, few top leaders have unbending principles. If a leader of the other party does something, it will be vigorously denounced. If a leader of your own party does the same thing, it will be adamantly defended. The primary goal of leaders of both parties is to win power and to keep power. There is little concern about ethics or morality in how they achieve that goal.

Lest readers think this is overwhelmingly a Republican perspective, think about this example. In 2008 during the Democratic presidential primaries, the Democratic Party did not count the Michigan vote, as that state's leaders had broken party rules when they scheduled the date of their state's primary election. Candidate Hillary Clinton said the Michigan primary vote did not mean anything because most candidates were not on the ballot. Then later, when the race with Barack Obama for delegate votes was neck-and-neck, she demanded that Michigan's delegate votes be counted because she had gotten the most votes. A key campaign spokesperson, Senator Chuck Schumer of New York, explained Clinton's reversal matter-of-factly on NBC's Meet the Press: "Each candidate, of course, takes the position that benefits them at the moment."

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That is a disgraceful admission. Schumer was admitting that politicians do not speak the truth or stand for principle. Rather, they change their position when it serves their purposes.

Union leaders are not immune to the reality that we are all immersed in the deep culture of corruption in American politics. Union leaders are not insusceptible to the paradigm in American politics that all that matters is winning and keeping power. Few labor leaders would publicly say what former Teamsters president Dave Beck did: "Unions are big business. Why should truck drivers and bottle washers be allowed to make big decisions affecting union policy? Would any corporation allow it?"⁴ Or the equally disturbing, anti-democratic words of Leon Davis, the founding president of SEIU 1199, now called SEIU United Healthcare Workers East: "The membership can only be a sounding board, even the delegates...they can't make decisions... The idea of wisdom emanating from the bottom is full of shit, not because they are

³ "Meet the Press" February 17, 2008 transcript at <https://www.nbcnews.com/id/wbna23209237>

⁴ Moody, Kim, *An Injury to All: The Decline of American Unionism* (San Francisco, CA and Chelsea, MI: Verso, 1988), 57.

stupid but because they have a job which is not running the union and knowing all the intricate business about it.”⁵

Yet some variant of that idea exists within many unions. That is, the idea that the members are too stupid to run a large organization. Instead, only skilled, experienced leaders can do it.

Another argument offered by some union officials is that workers do not really care about democracy, but just want more money in their wallets. Former Service Employees (SEIU) president Andy Stern wrote: “Workers want...strength and a voice, not some purist, intellectual, historical, mythical, democracy.”⁶ The only ones who care about union democracy, according to this argument, are “radicals” like those around the reform group Labor Notes, and university-based labor historians and labor studies professors. But the truth is that union democracy translates into stronger unions, which lead to better contracts, which means more money in workers’ wallets. Management knows the extent of member involvement in a union when it sits down at the bargaining table.

This paper will address threats to union democracy. Some are well known, such as out-and-out corruption. Some, such as elected union officials living lives of luxury and a lack of transparency in union finances, are somewhat known but often brushed aside as not relevant. Others are less discussed but just as important, such as bullying and manipulating the members.

This paper addresses union democracy at the level of union membership, executive board, bargaining committee, and union committee meetings. It is beyond the scope of this paper to delve into the equally important role of union democracy in the workplace, including workers organizing contract campaigns, marches on the boss, strikes, and other job actions that build power at work by building workplace activism and worker-leaders who confront employers.⁷

Twenty-five unionists from across the country were interviewed for this paper, the bulk of them rank-and-file activists. Due to the nature of the topic, I will not list the names of rank-and-file interviewees or their local unions.

Literature on Union Democracy

⁵ Kim Moody, “Reversing the ‘Model,’ Thoughts on Jane McAlevey’s Plan for Union Power,” November 8, 2020 Spectre Journal, citing Leon Fink and Bryan Greenberg, *Upheaval in the Quiet Zone: A History of Hospital Workers’ Union Local 1199* (Urbana IL: University of Illinois Press, 1989), 203-04.

⁶ Steve Early, *Embedded with Organized Labor*, *ibid*, 221

⁷ For examples of how workers build power in the workplace, see: Alexandra Bradbury, Mark Brenner, and Jane Slaughter, *Secrets of a Successful Organizer* (Brooklyn: Labor Notes, 2016); *Troublemaker’s Handbook 2: How to Fight Back Where You Work and Win!* (Detroit: Labor Notes, 2005); *How to Jump-Start Your Union: Lessons from the Chicago Teachers* (Detroit: Labor Notes, 2014); Steven Ashby and C.J. Hawking, *The Staley Workers and the Fight for a New American Labor Movement* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press 2009); Steven Ashby and Robert Bruno, *A Fight for the Soul of Public Education: The Story of the 2012 Chicago Teachers’ Strike* (Ithaca: ILR Press, 2016).

There is relatively little academic or historical literature focusing exclusively on union democracy. Much of the writing on the topic can be found in three sources. First, the Association for Union Democracy (AUD), a non-profit founded in 1969 is labor's leading voice on democracy issues.⁸ AUD founder Herman Benson chronicled the group's history of working with reformers in multiple unions in his 2004 book *Rebels, Reformers, And Racketeers: How Insurgents Transformed The Labor Movement*. Second, Labor Notes, a reform group within the labor movement founded in 1979, publishes a monthly magazine of the same name that chronicles efforts at social movement unionism, applauds bottom-up unionism efforts, and writes critically of autocratic unions. Labor Notes published the 1999 must-read book written by Mike Parker and Martha Gruelle, *Democracy Is Power: Rebuilding Unions from the Bottom Up*.⁹ Finally, the Teamsters for a Democratic Union publishes the quarterly magazine Teamster Voice that rails against undemocratic practices in that union.¹⁰

After the 1930s labor upsurge, a slew of books appeared, most of which emphasized the power of an activist rank-and-file. A rare book that focused on democratic practices was Seymour Martin Lipset, Martin Trow, and James S. Coleman's *Union Democracy: The Internal Politics of the International Typographical Union* (New York: New Free Press, 1956; then reprinted by Doubleday Anchor, 1962). Two recent labor history books focus on two exceptionally democratic and militant unions. Rose Feuerer wrote about the United Electrical workers union in *Radical Unionism in the Midwest, 1900-1950* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2006). As well, Toni Gilpin wrote about the Farm Equipment union in *The Long Deep Grudge: A Story of Big Capital, Radical Labor, and Class War in the American Heartland* (Chicago: Haymarket Press, 2020).

Three books about union reform efforts stand out: Dan LaBotz's *Rank-and-File Rebellion: Teamsters for a Democratic Union* (London: Verso, 1991); Paul Clark's *The Miners' Fight for Democracy: Arnold Miller and the Reform of the United Mine Workers* (Ithaca: ILR Press, 1981); and Robert Bruno's *Reforming the Chicago Teamsters: The Story of Local 705* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois Press, 2003).¹¹

Two labor activists have written extensively criticizing the Service Employees International Union leadership's undemocratic practices, and more broadly discussing bottom-up unionism,

⁸ Association for Union Democracy website at <https://uniondemocracy.org/>. "Herman Benson, Who Fought Union Corruption, Dies at 104," July 10, 2020 New York Times at <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/10/nyregion/herman-benson-who-fought-union-corruption-dies-at-104.html>

⁹ Kim Moody, one of Labor Notes' founders, has written extensively about revitalizing labor, including the power of an educated, mobilized rank-and-file, most notably in *An Injury to All: The Decline of American Unionism* (London: Verso, 1988), but also in *On New Terrain: How Capital is Reshaping the Battleground of Class War* (Chicago: Haymarket Press, 2017); *In Solidarity: Essays on Working-Class Organization and Strategy in the United States* (Chicago: Haymarket Press, 2014); and *US Labor in Trouble and Transition: The Failure of Reform from Above, the Promise of Revival from Below* (London: Verso, 2007).

¹⁰ Teamsters for a Democratic Union at www.tdu.org

¹¹ Also see the pamphlet, Steve Downs, *Hell on Wheels: The Success and Failure of Reform in Transport Workers Union Local 100* (Detroit, Solidarity, 2008).

most notably Jane McAlevey's *Raising Expectations (and Raising Hell): My Decade Fighting for the Labor Movement* (New York/London: Verso, 2012); and Steve Early's *The Civil Wars in U.S. Labor: Birth of a New Workers' Movement or Death Throes of the Old?* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2011).¹²

There are also books on recent labor struggles that involved immense union democracy, including Steven Ashby and C.J. Hawking's *Staley: The Struggle for a New American Labor Movement* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009) about the bottom-up transformation of Paperworkers Local 7-837 in Decatur, Illinois in the mid-1990s, and the militant national campaign it waged against a multi-national corporation; Steven Ashby and Robert Bruno's *A Fight for the Soul of Public Education: The Story of the 2012 Chicago Teachers' Strike* (Ithaca NY: ILR Press, 2016) that chronicled how the new Caucus of Rank-and-File Educators (CORE) leadership of the Chicago Teachers Union led a member-driven contract campaign and an inspiring strike; and Peter Rachleff's *Hard-pressed in the Heartland: The Hormel Strike and the Future of the Labor Movement* (Boston: South End Press, 1993), about how rank-and-file meatpackers in United Food and Commercial Workers Local P-9 in Austin, Minnesota built a democratic and militant union to battle concessions in the mid-1980s.¹³

Defining Union Democracy and Why It Matters

Common phrases that point to the essence of union democracy are “a member-driven union” and “bottom-up unionism.” As Teamsters for a Democratic Union national organizer Ken Paff defines it: “The power of the union is in the members, in active members who feel a part of the union, who call it ‘our union’ instead of ‘the union.’ They see themselves as part of it. It’s not just an insurance agency.”¹⁴ Union democracy involves not just leadership embracing democratic procedures and elections, but creating a culture of active debate, of leadership welcoming dissent, and of contested elections as slates argue their program to lead the union. Union democracy occurs when the leadership embraces an educated, active, vocal membership.

¹² Jane McAlevey has also written *No Shortcuts: Organizing for Power in the New Gilded Age* (Oxford University Press, 2016), and *A Collective Bargain: Unions, Organizing, and the Fight for Democracy* (New York: HarperCollins/Ecco, 2020). Steve Early has also written *Embedded with Organized Labor: Journalistic Reflections on the Class War at Home* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2009); and *Save Our Unions* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2013).

¹³ Two other books on the 2012 Chicago teachers’ strike are Micah Uetricht, *Strike for America: Chicago Teachers Against Austerity* (London: Verso, 2014), and Mark Brenner, Jenny Brown, Jane Slaughter, Samantha Winslow, and Alexandra Bradbury, *How to Jump-Start Your Union: Lessons from the Chicago Teachers* (Detroit: Labor Notes, 2014). Two other books on the 1985-86 Hormel meatpacking strike that include discussion of the democratic character of Local P-9 are Hardy Green, *On Strike At Hormel: The Struggle for a Democratic Labor Movement* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991), and Dave Hage, *No Retreat, No Surrender: Labor's War at Hormel* (NYC: William Morrow, 1989).

¹⁴ Interview with Ken Paff, May 2021

“There needs to be more open debate in my union and the whole labor movement,” said one union activist. “The leadership is afraid of that, and unless we get over that fear and have people say what they think and have that open discussion, we will never grow stronger.”¹⁵

The late Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) president Karen Lewis put it well:

“I trust our membership, totally. And when you trust your membership, good things happen. The key is that people need to decide what they want their union to be, and I’m talking about members as opposed to leaders. Every union needs to do some soul searching about what its purpose is... The union leadership does not tell the members what to do. To me, having those discussions in the rank and file is so important.

“We do take democracy seriously. And I know that’s frustrating for people, but in the end it is ultimately a better way to govern a union because it is not top-down leadership. We have encouraged healthy debate and we have encouraged analysis. It was something that was never encouraged by union leadership before. It’s a better way to move the union.”¹⁶

The CTU exhibited tremendous democracy, for example, when after seven days on strike in 2012, the leadership recommended that the eight hundred elected delegates vote to ratify a contract, but the delegates instead sent the contract to the members for a two-day discussion culminating in each school’s members telling their delegate how to vote. “The officers of this union follow the lead of our members,” said Lewis in a press release.¹⁷ Union democracy means that when the majority of the rank-and-file disagree with leadership, the officers graciously accept and do not take it as a personal insult that requires bullying and manipulation to get the ranks to come around to supporting what their leaders think is best.

Nelson Mandela, the South African anti-apartheid leader and later the country’s first Black president, spoke often about leadership, and his views also represent ideals of union democracy. “I learned to have the patience to listen when people put forward their views,” said Mandela in 1991, “even if I think those views are wrong. You can’t reach a just decision in a dispute unless you listen to both sides, ask questions, and view the evidence placed before you. If you don’t allow people to contribute, to offer their point of view, or to criticize what has been put before them, then...you can never build that instrument of collective leadership.”¹⁸

Another great example of union democracy is the classic 1954 film “Salt of the Earth,” based on a New Mexico mineworkers’ strike. After yet another preventable mine accident occurs and the ambulance rushes injured workers to the hospital, the workers gather outside the mine. The owner and the supervisor rush over to order everyone to go

¹⁵ Interview with unionist F, May 2021

¹⁶ Ashby and Bruno, *A Fight for the Soul of Public Education*, *ibid*, 120

¹⁷ Ashby and Bruno, *A Fight for the Soul of Public Education*, *ibid*, 219-227

¹⁸ “Oprah Talks to Nelson Mandela,” April 2001 *O, the Oprah Magazine*, at <https://www.oprah.com/world/oprah-interviews-nelson-mandela/4>

back to work. The workers, who were all Latino, talk quietly among themselves in Spanish about whether it is time to wage a safety strike. The mine manager orders the Anglo union representative from the international union, the Mine Mill and Smelt workers, to “tell the men to get back to work.” The union staffer spits back, “They don’t work for me. I work for them.” Those words are an outstanding representation of union democracy in its essence.¹⁹

Unions need effective, experienced leaders to exercise power. Unions need to be involved in politics to exercise power. But without an actively engaged and empowered membership, which can only come to fruition with full union democracy, unions are more vulnerable to employer attacks. The more union democracy a union has, the more its members are both active in making union decisions and are educated, organized, and mobilized to fight the boss and hostile legislators, the more likely the union will win real gains for its workers. Conversely, the more inactive the members are in the union’s affairs and the less democratic a union, the less power the union has.

Some readers of this paper may argue that speaking publicly about labor’s internal problems is giving ammunition to labor’s enemies. The opposite is true. Union democracy is not tertiary to unions’ ability to fight aggressively and win rights for their members and for all workers. Rather, union democracy is integral to building worker power. The greatest ammunition union leaders can give to labor’s enemies is to run their unions without full member democracy. In my and Bob Bruno’s *A Fight for the Soul of Public Education* on the 2012 Chicago teachers’ strike, we quote a CTU member describing the state of the union before the Caucus of Rank-and-File Educators won office in 2010, detailing how an undemocratic union demoralizes and demobilizes the members:

“A lot of what people felt was [that] this malaise hit, not just the Chicago Teachers Union, but unions in general. Unions are known for having their bigwigs and the lawyers go into the [bargaining] room, come out with a contract, [and tell the members] ‘Here’s what we came up with, accept it or reject it.’ And everybody goes, ‘Ah, well, it’s probably the best we’re gonna do,’ and members accept costly cutbacks and concessions with quiet resignation.”²⁰

Unionists rightly argue that, over the past four decades, there is a direct correlation between the assault on unions and the subsequent decline in the percentage of unionized workers in America, and the stagnant wages, rising out-of-pocket health care costs, and erosion of pensions in that same period. When unions are embattled, all workers suffer the consequences. However, it can also be argued that there is a direct correlation between the breadth of union democracy in the labor movement from the late 1930s to the 1950s and the ability of unions to win historic gains at the bargaining table, and today’s labor movement with its weakened member involvement and uneven union democracy, and its lessened ability to bargain decent contracts.

As well, when there is little member involvement or union democracy, unions tend to end up with leaders whose primary goal is keeping their jobs and keeping union dues flowing. These

¹⁹ The entire film is available for free on the web at:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5Dt2PKU4yLg>

²⁰ Ashby and Bruno, *A Fight for the Soul of Public Education*, *ibid.*, 106

leaders want workers to have good contracts, but they are not risk takers. Rather, they are risk averse. A bad contract still keeps the dues flowing. A strike, given terrible American labor laws, can threaten the existence of a union. Several unionists interviewed for this paper said that their presidents had repeatedly told members that public sector strikes in most states are illegal and that they personally “would not go to jail” for the union. In some cases, union leaders made little effort to educate members about the actual benefits and consequences to conducting a strike in the public sector. Despite public sector strikes only being legal in 13 states, there were 35 illegal teacher strikes in 2018 and 2019 involving about 412,000 educators, beginning with West Virginia. Most of those strikes, which inspired the labor movement, won significant gains.²¹

The 1959 Labor-Management Reporting and Disclosure Act (LMDRA), or Landrum Griffin Act, provides some legal protections for unionists seeking to democratize their union.²² However, of the topics covered in detail in this paper, only corruption is illegal. The other undemocratic practices are acceptable practice according to the law and according to union constitutions and by-laws. The members, not the law or union rules, are the ultimate protectors of union democracy.

A Threat to Union Democracy: Corruption

The most obvious threat to union democracy is also the rarest – straight out corruption. Although uncommon, newspapers and rightwing groups love to publicize instances of union officials betraying their members by stealing from the union treasury, demanding kickbacks from vendors, or accepting employer bribes. Hollywood films and television shows rarely mention unions, but when they do, they often focus on union corruption.²³

²¹ “35 Illegal Teacher Strikes Since 2018. Are More Coming This Month?,” Rutgers School of Management and Labor Relations, August 1, 2020, at https://www.newswise.com/coronavirus/35-illegal-teacher-strikes-since-2018-are-more-coming-t-his-month/?article_id=736742. Also see: Rebecca Kolins Givan and Amy Schragger Lang, editors, *Strike for the Common Good: Fighting for the Future of Public Education* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2020)

²² Pushed by union reformers including the Association for Union Democracy as a union member’s bill of rights, the LMDRA came about as a result of corruption and mob connections in the Teamsters, as well as the Mineworkers and International Longshore Association. A major weakness in the law is that it does not cover public sector unions with no private sector members. The online LM-2 union financial reports referred to in this paper exist because of the LMDRA. For a detailed outline of the law, see Association for Union Democracy at <https://uniondemocracy.org/legal-rights-and-organizing/about-the-lmrda-and-the-union-members-bill-of-rights/>. The U.S. Department of Labor's Office of Labor Management Standards oversees the LMDRA’s election rules, at <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/olms>. As well see Herman Benson, *How to Get an Honest Union Election* (NYC: Association for Union Democracy, 2004).

²³ For example, the 2019 film “The Irishman,” the 1992 film “Hoffa,” or the 1978 film “F.I.S.T.,” all about Teamsters corruption; or the 1978 film “Blue Collar,” the 1954 film “On the

The most recent betrayal of members was by the United Auto Workers' leadership colluding with Fiat Chrysler management. Twelve union officers – including Presidents Gary Jones and Dennis Williams -- and three Fiat Chrysler executives have been convicted. UAW leaders admitted to taking at least \$3.5 million in bribes from Chrysler to negotiate contracts favorable to management. According to one Fiat Chrysler official, the goal was to keep UAW leaders “fat, dumb, and happy.”²⁴ As well, UAW leaders in charge of both Chrysler and General Motors' bargaining stole millions of dollars in members' dues for their personal use, and got millions in kickbacks from UAW vendors. In December 2020, the federal government announced a six-year plan to monitor UAW finances and leadership actions.²⁵ “The way our contracts have been going the last few decades,” said one UAW activist, “where we have been losing ground continuously, intuitively we knew there was collusion between the companies and the unions. The corruption scandal is a symptom of the union and company working together since the 1980s.”²⁶

The Teamsters have had corruption issues for decades, and on a scale unlike other unions, including extensive ties to the mob. The international union and presidents of local unions loaned money from the union treasury to the mob in order to profit themselves. From the 1960s to the 1980s, four IBT presidents were indicted or went to prison.²⁷ The AFL-CIO expelled the

Waterfront,” or the 2012 anti-teachers' union film “Won't Back Down.” The fact that union corruption is negligible – certainly compared to corporate corruption – does not stop billionaire-backed anti-union front groups from lying about it. For example, unionfacts.com wrongly states that labor is “plagued by rampant corruption, embezzlement, racketeering and influence from numerous organized crime organizations.”

<https://www.unionfacts.com/article/crime-and-corruption/>

²⁴ “Feds: Bargaining rivals stole millions from FCA; kept UAW officials 'fat, dumb and happy,’” July 27, 2017 Detroit Free Press, at

<https://www.freep.com/story/news/2017/07/28/feds-bargaining-rivals-stole-millions-fca-kept-uaw-officials-fat-dumb-and-happy/517297001/>

²⁵ “Former UAW Vice President Sentenced to 30 Months for Taking \$250,000 in Bribes and Kickbacks,” November 17, 2020, U.S. Attorney's Office, Eastern District of Michigan, Department of Justice, at

<https://www.justice.gov/usao-edmi/pr/former-uaw-vice-president-sentenced-30-months-taking-250000-bribes-and-kickbacks>. “The United States Reaches a Settlement with the United Auto Workers Union to Reform the Union and End Corruption and Fraud,” December 14, 2020, U.S. Attorney's Office, Eastern District of Michigan, Department of Justice, at <https://www.justice.gov/usao-edmi/pr/united-states-reaches-settlement-united-auto-workers-union-reform-union-and-end>

²⁶ Interview with unionist E, April 2021

²⁷ Daniel Tobin was IBT president from 1907 to 1952. Dave Beck, IBT president from 1952 to 1957, was in prison from 1962 to 1965. James R. Hoffa, IBT president from 1957 to 1971, was in prison from 1967 to 1971. Frank Fitzsimmons the acting president while Hoffa was in prison and was IBT president from 1971 to 1981. Roy Williams, IBT president from 1981 to 1983, was in prison from 1985 to 1988. Jackie Presser, IBT president from 1983 to 1988, was indicted but died before prosecution. William McCarthy was IBT president from 1988 to 1991.

Teamsters in 1957 for corruption, let them back in again in 1987, then they left for their own reasons in 2005. Today the labor movement is virtually mob-free (and organized crime is negligible in U.S. society compared to its role in the first half of the 20th century). However, the Teamsters at the local union level continue to have corruption problems. For example, in Chicago in 2019, John Coli, head of Local 727 and Joint Council 25, pled guilty to extorting the Cinespace Chicago film studio where the TV shows “Empire” and “Chicago Fire” were filmed, receiving hundreds of thousands of dollars in bribes under the threat that Coli would call a strike.²⁸

However, the danger of a union leadership taking corrupt actions cannot be minimized by arguing it primarily happened in the Teamsters or a few other unions. Reformers, too, feel pressure to take corrupt actions to stay in power. The most infamous example is Teamster president Ron Carey’s staff illegally diverting \$885,000 from the union treasury to progressive non-profit groups like Citizen Action, in exchange for those groups donating to the 1996 Carey re-election campaign. Several Teamsters staffers pled guilty, and Carey was expelled from the union but found not guilty in court, for the illegal money laundering scheme.²⁹

The primary lesson of the Carey fiasco is that the end never justifies the means. There is always pressure on reformers to cut corners, to skirt the law, to smear opponents – the means -- in order to stay in power so they can continue to do good things – the end. “I acted in an attempt to save the campaign of a candidate I admired,” a sobbing Jere Nash, Carey’s campaign manager, told the judge.³⁰ The day that union activists say to themselves, “We have a great leadership, we trust them, we don’t have to monitor them, corruption is impossible,” is the day the union has opened the door for corruption to creep in.

A Threat to Union Democracy: Acting like Royalty

Another threat to union democracy occurs when elected union leaders begin to act as if they are royalty. There is no union, however progressive or militant, that is immune to its

Ron Carey was IBT president from 1991 to 1998. James Hoffa Jr. has been IBT president since 1998, and declined to run in the March 2022 election.

²⁸ “Ex-Chicago Teamster Boss Coli Pleads Guilty to Shakedowns, Tax Fraud,” August 13, 2019 National Legal and Policy Center, at <https://nlpc.org/2019/08/13/ex-chicago-teamster-boss-coli-pleads-guilty-to-shakedowns-tax-fraud/>

²⁹ Ron Carey was not charged with money laundering, as the U.S Attorney could not find evidence, but was instead charged with perjury for declaring his innocence. The jury found him not guilty of that lesser charge. Ken Crowe, “The Vindication of Ron Carey,” December/January 2001 *Union Democracy Review*, at <https://www.uniondemocracy.org/UDR/22-vindication%20of%20Ron%20Carey.htm>

³⁰ “3 Teamster Aides Make Guilty Pleas and Hint at Plot,” September 19, 1997 *New York Times* at <https://www.nytimes.com/1997/09/19/us/3-teamster-aides-make-guilty-pleas-and-hint-at-plot.html>

leadership slowly evolving into prima donnas. The only answer is for complete financial transparency, a membership that monitors its leadership, and a leadership that constantly monitors its own behavior and that embraces members monitoring all union finances.

The idea seeps into the soul of even the best leaders that “I deserve the best. I work hard for this union. I am responsible for thousands of people.” Union officials start to think they should wear expensive clothes, because they negotiate with corporate lawyers and officials who wear expensive clothes. They start to think that they, too, should have huge houses in wealthy suburbs. They start to think that they, too, should have the latest models of leased luxury cars.

One element of this is indefensible union salaries. There is, of course, no comparison to CEO salaries, which depending on the year and on how one measures, are 300 to 400 times the average worker’s salary. However, that does not justify salaries of union officials who, while miniscule in comparison to that of corporate CEOs, nevertheless pay themselves enough to qualify as among the wealthiest two percent in income in America.³¹ As the Teamsters for a Democratic Union puts it, our union is “not a corporation. We are a movement of working people. Our leaders should reflect those values and fight like hell to advance our members, not themselves.”³² As well, democratic union officers share with their members all information on their salaries, expenses, and benefits. Union workers’ wages are not secret; those figures are in every union contract.

The United Electrical workers union’s oft repeated saying declares, “You join the union to get something out of the boss, not to get something out of the union.” “We believe that staff and officers of the union,” said UE president Carl Rosen, “should live a life that is not dissimilar from the members they are representing, fighting for, fighting alongside, and helping to organize. You understand why it matters so much because you’re living it yourself.”³³

When you have been in union office for many years, you cannot truly know because you have not recently lived the myriad of ways your members suffer at work. Moreover, if you take

³¹ There are multiple reports on what income constitutes being in the richest one percent of the working population in America. The Social Security Administration 2019 data says that an individual making \$300,000 is among the wealthiest 0.8% in America, and making an annual income of \$200,000 puts you among the wealthiest 1.6%. “Wage Statistics for 2019,” Social Security Administration chart, at <https://www.ssa.gov/cgi-bin/netcomp.cgi?year=2019>. Using data from the U.S. Census Bureau, this website says that in 2020 the wealthiest one percent earned at least **\$361,020:**

<https://dqydj.com/average-median-top-individual-income-percentiles/>. Bloomberg News says that the wealthiest one percent earn at least \$488,000, Ben Steverman and Reade Pickert, “This Is What It Takes to Be in the 1% Around the World,” February 7, 2020 Bloomberg at <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/features/2020-02-07/how-to-be-in-the-richest-1-around-the-world?sref=Bq9vyGd4>

³² “How Teamster Officer Salaries Dramatically Changed – and Why,” April 19, 2021, Teamsters for a Democratic Union, at https://www.tdu.org/how_teamster_salaries_dramatically_changed_and_why

³³ Interview with United Electrical (UE) workers president Carl Rosen, May 2021; and “Them and Us Unionism,” July 2020, UE pamphlet, at <https://www.ueunion.org/ThemAndUs/>

home two, three, or four hundred thousand dollars a year or more, then you are living a lifestyle far above that of the average union member you represent.³⁴ Corporate boards of directors constantly raise CEO pay by pointing to other CEO's pay, in a never-ending vicious circle. Union officials that do the same – point to other union officers' salaries to justify giving themselves big raises – are adopting the corruption of corporations to justify their own largesse paid for by members' dues.

It is easy to focus on the most corrupt unions. For example, President Harold Daggett of the corrupt east coast-based International Longshoremen Association (ILA) – which only has 33,000 members -- made \$614,000 in 2019, and a second salary of \$159,000 as “president emeritus” of Local 1804.³⁵ His son Dennis as an ILA vice-president makes \$321,000 in addition to his \$294,000 salary as president of Local 1804. The highest paid eight ILA officers together make more than \$3.6 million. While, due to the pressure of the reform movement, the Teamsters have made major gains in reducing massive salaries, nationally 10 officers make more than \$300,000 a year and 56 make between \$200,000 and \$300,000 a year.³⁶

However, there is not a correlation between how progressive an international union is and what it pays its top officers.³⁷

³⁴ Interview with UE president Carl Rosen, May 2021. The top three AFL-CIO officers are paid above \$200,000 a year. According to LM-2 reports, AFL-CIO President Richard Trumka made \$272,000 in 2019; Secretary-Treasurer Elizabeth Schuler and Executive Vice-President Tefere Gebre each made \$239,000. In the name of full disclosure, my university program has co-authored a report that disagrees with my criticism of some top union leaders' pay. See Frank Manzo IV and Robert Bruno, “The Pay of Union Leaders: Debunking the ‘Big Labor’ Myth,” January 12, 2015, published jointly by the University of Illinois at Urbana Champaign Labor Education Program and the Illinois Economic Policy Institute, at https://ler.illinois.edu/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/ILEPI-LEP-Economic-Commentary-The-Pay-of-Union-Leaders_FINAL.pdf.

³⁵ “Along New York Harbor, ‘On the Waterfront’ Endures,” January 6, 2017 *New York Times* at <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/06/nyregion/new-york-harbor-on-the-waterfront.html>. The ILA should not be confused with the west coast-based ILWU.

³⁶ The Teamsters for a Democratic Union notes that: “Top Teamster officials once paid themselves nearly \$2 million a year in today's dollars. TDU, the right to vote, and leaders who put members first have brought salaries in line with the rest of the labor movement. When Ron Carey was elected General President in the first ever one-member one-vote election, his first announcement was that he would cut his own salary to \$150,000 in 1992. It signaled a new day in the Teamsters. A few years earlier, IBT President Jackie Presser had a salary of \$755,474, which would be a whopping \$1,900,357 in today's dollars.” “How Teamster Officer Salaries Dramatically Changed – and Why,” April 19, 2021, *ibid*.

³⁷ All data on union officer salaries is from the U.S. Department of Labor, Office of Labor-Management Standards, LM-2 forms, at <https://olmsapps.dol.gov/query/getOrgQry.do>. All unions that include any private sector members must file an annual LM-2 financial report, which is accessible online. Entirely public sector unions, unfortunately, are not required to file these financial reports. Small local unions with private sector members which have annual receipts between \$10,000 and \$250,000 and that have private sector members file LM-3 forms.

- The California Nurses Association/National Nurses United is the leading voice for single payer health care in America. Former Executive Director RoseAnn Demoro made \$608,000 in 2019.
- The American Federation of Teachers is leading the fight for fully funded public schools. President Randi Weingarten made \$418,000 in 2019, with fifteen staffers making more than \$200,000.
- The United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) has long campaigned to bring a union to Wal-Mart workers. President Anthony Perrone made \$309,000 in 2019, with twenty staffers making \$198,000 or more.
- The Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union (RWDSU), a division within the UFCW, led the unionization effort in spring 2021 at Amazon's Alabama warehouse. President Stuart Appelbaum made \$335,000 in 2019 and Secretary-Treasurer Jack Wurm, Jr. made \$314,000.
- The Service Employees (SEIU) has led labor's most innovative and militant campaigns with its Justice for Janitors and Fight for Fifteen organizing. President Mary Kay Henry made \$256,000 in 2019, and eight other staffers make more than \$200,000 a year.
- American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) has led the fight against austerity attacks on public workers. President Lee Saunders made \$332,000 in 2019, and nine staffers make more than \$200,000.

Top union officials who receive generous salaries don't like to talk about it, and they often attack unionists who do as anti-union. Occasionally a leader will try to justify it, as AFT president Randi Weingarten did in a 2012 interview: "In the corporate world, salaries for CEOs are not three to five times what their employees make. It's hundreds of times more."³⁸

Of course, not all international union presidents are paid huge salaries in comparison to their members' pay. For example, United Electrical workers president Carl Rosen makes only \$70,400. The UE since its founding has held, alone among U.S. unions, that no officer can make more than its highest paid union member. American Nurses Association (ANA) president Pamela Cipriano made \$84,000 in 2017. International Longshore Workers Union (ILWU) president William Adams made \$139,000 in 2019. American Flight Attendants (AFA) president Sarah Nelson made \$156,000 in 2019. United Steelworkers (USW) president Tom Conway made \$169,000 in 2019.

Another violation of ethics occurs when union officers or staff are paid a second or third salary as a representative to a statewide, regional, or international body. Naturally, any delegate or representative to a higher union body should have their expenses reimbursed. But no union official should be paid two or three salaries for doing their job. Attending infrequent meetings of a state or international body of their union is part of their job. A union leader who takes a second or third salary is enriching themselves using union dues. This is doubly true when taking a second or third salary adds \$50,000 or more to a local union officer's base salary. If a union

³⁸ "Randi Weingarten answers 'anything'," October 27, 2012 *Salon* at https://www.salon.com/2012/10/26/randi_weingarten_answers_anything. Actually, Weingarten's salary is six times her average member's pay, although four times the average salary of the most senior AFT teachers

officer is spending a large amount of time also working for a higher union body, then a second salary is ethical; but then the officer's local union salary should be reduced, as they are not working full-time for their local. "No union official can do more than one full-time job; that's what full-time means," said one union activist. "It's not an hourly job."³⁹

Former Chicago Federation of Labor (CFL) President Dennis Gannon made \$520,000 a year, when his CFL salary was added to his inflated city pension taken while working for the CFL, and to his salary for sitting on the Blue Cross/Blue Shield board of directors.⁴⁰ Gannon retired in 2010 and went to work for a hedge fund, Grosvenor Capital Management; when his successor Jorge Ramirez retired as CFL president in 2018, he also went to work for Grosvenor.

The most well known examples of multiple salaries are in the Teamsters union. Looking at 2019 figures, Richard Middleton, for example, earned \$185,758 as Secretary-Treasurer of Carson, California-based Local 572. He earned an additional \$8,450 as a trustee of Teamsters Joint Council 42, and another \$134,537 from the Teamsters international union. He has one job, with various duties, and took home three salaries totaling \$328,745. As the Teamsters for a Democratic Union notes, "Multiple salaries should not be handed out as political favors or patronage."⁴¹ However, paying a union official two or more salaries is not limited to the Teamsters, nor can it be linked to how moderate or progressive a union is.

Beyond salaries, there are multiple other ways that union officials can receive expensive perks. In our book *Staley*, we described how Paperworkers union president Wayne Glenn had a hot tub installed in the room adjacent to his union office. We described how AFL-CIO Executive Council winter meetings have been held in posh Florida resorts with rooms costing more than \$550 a night (in 2021 dollars), and that most international union presidents drove around in stretch limousines. "There were more limos circling the meeting area than at the Academy Awards," noted UPIU Local 7-737 president Dave Watts.⁴² Some union locals provide leased cars for officers and staff, even when their jobs do not require extensive travel. The amount that local and international union presidents spend on expenses varies tremendously, from modest to extensive.

Excessive salaries are not just antithetical to union values; they also aid employers' anti-union drives. Whenever workers launch a union drive at their worksite, management or their union-busting consultants inevitably bring up the salaries of top union leaders paid by members' dues. Since the 2016 Supreme Court's Janus decision, anti-union billboards have appeared across the country funded by rightwing groups calling on teachers to "give themselves a raise" by leaving the union, and teachers have received similar mass mailings in multiple

³⁹ Interview with unionist C, April 2021

⁴⁰ "One-day rehiring nets former Chicago labor leader a \$158,000 city pension," September 21, 2011 *Chicago Tribune*, at <https://www.chicagotribune.com/news/ct-met-pensions-gannon-20110922-story.html>

⁴¹ "Salary Report – The \$150K Club," October 24, 2019, Teamsters for a Democratic Union, at https://www.tdu.org/teamster_officer_salaries

⁴² Ashby and Hawking, *Staley*, *ibid*, chapter 14 "The Paperworkers" and chapter 15 "Mission to Bal Harbour." Watts' quote: January 1996 UPIU 7837 *News from the War Zone*, cited in *Staley*, 231.

states.⁴³ Unionists respond that every organization needs dues to function, and explain all the services – collective bargaining, the grievance procedure, arbitration, lobbying for pro-worker legislation, etc. – that unions provide to members.

However, few within labor ask whether union dues are too high, and whether a lower rate might aid union organizing campaigns. The average rate is 2.5 hours pay a month or about 1.45% of a worker’s gross pay. Some unions do not base dues on a person’s hourly or annual wage, but have a fixed rate that penalizes lower paid workers. Further, a few unions charge new members an “initiation fee,” which has the effect of making new hires immediately angry with the union when they view their first paycheck.

In the spring 2021 union drive at Amazon, for example, management repeatedly attacked the RWDSU union’s roughly \$500 a year dues. A full-time Amazon worker making \$16 an hour would take home roughly \$27,000, which makes that \$500 in dues equal to 1.85% of take-home pay. Would a cap of one percent on union dues, or \$300 a year for the average Amazon worker, have aided that drive? Would a cap of \$200,000 on the top RWDSU or UFCW (their parent union) officials’ salaries have given management less ammunition to attack the union?

A related question that is rarely asked is whether unions are spending dues money judiciously. A large percentage of members’ dues, sometimes more than fifty percent, go to the state or district offices and to the international union. Regional bodies can be extremely helpful to local unions by providing experienced bargainers to assist in contract negotiations, training for new officers, organizers to assist forming new local unions, and by offering educational classes for members on building stronger unions. But do union’s national headquarters need massive budgets? The six largest U.S. unions’ national offices average \$315 million in expenditures per year.⁴⁴ Would much of that money be better spent by local unions and regional bodies hiring more organizers and union representatives? Furthermore, national office expenditures have ballooned. For example, the National Education Association’s national office expenditures rose

⁴³ “As L.A. strike begins, eye-catching billboards tell teachers they don’t have to strike – they can quit the union,” January 15, 2019 California Policy Center, at <https://californiapolicycenter.org/as-l-a-strike-begins-eye-catching-billboards-tell-teachers-they-dont-have-to-strike-they-can-quit-the-union/>. Billboard image, December 20, 2019, Freedom Foundation, at <https://www.freedomfoundation.com/labor/freedom-foundation-santas-spread-their-yearly-mess-age-of-liberty/attachment/california-teacher-vacation-billboards/>. Civitas Institute at <https://www.nccivitas.org/tag/ncteacherfreedom-com/>. Nevada Policy Institute at <https://www.npri.org/commentary/chance-for-nevada-teachers-to-get-a-raise-is-here/>

⁴⁴ The six largest unions’ total 2019 national union expenditures and membership as reported by international unions on LM-2 forms to the Department of Labor are:
National Education Association (NEA): \$650 million with 3.0 million members
Service Employees International Union (SEIU): \$310 million with 1.85 million members
American Federation of Teachers (AFT): \$238 million with 1.7 million member
American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees (AFSCME): \$174 million with 1.35 million members
Teamsters: \$196 million with 1.2 million members
United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW): \$325 million with 1.2 million members

by 246% from 2000 to 2020, while its membership increased only 17%, and the Service Employees International Union's national office expenditures rose 214% in the same period, while its membership rose only 35%.

Union officials can also act like royalty in ensuring that union leadership is passed to their children. Dynasties exist in monarchies – a prince or princess becomes king or queen when their parent, the ruling monarch, dies. Dynasties should not exist in democratic organizations. Unions should never have sons or daughters take over as president when their parent dies. For example, Eco James Coli, who had mob ties, was president of Teamsters Local 727 from 1962 until his death in 1982. When he died, the presidency went to his son, the previously mentioned John Coli, Sr. When John Coli, Sr. was charged in July 2019 and then sent to prison for corruption, his son John T. Coli, Jr. took over the presidency of Local 727. Further, during his presidency John Coli, Sr. siphoned millions of dollars of union dues to family members he hired, including his son Joseph Coli and his brother William Coli.⁴⁵

Another problem is that in some local unions, especially those covering an entire state or multiple states, there are no contested elections as it is far too difficult for challengers to reach members to campaign for their votes. In the SEIU, for example, the largest four locals have a total of nearly one million members.⁴⁶ In other unions, the bulk of power and policy making lies in its statewide or regional bodies, such as with AFSCME and the Carpenters union. Further, it is not uncommon for union presidents, whether at the local or international level, to lead for decades until they retire or die. An additional undemocratic practice is when members are pressured not to run to be a convention delegate or for the union's executive board, because the leadership has a slate and wants an uncontested election to show the union's "unity." If there were no contested elections in U.S. political elections, the American people would rightly decry the end of democracy. The same sentiment applies to union elections.

In most international unions, there is no direct vote for the president and top officers; rather, delegates vote at conventions.⁴⁷ Delegates are far easier to control by leadership, and so at nearly all international union conventions there are no seriously contested elections for the top union positions. The same is true in the AFL-CIO where the tradition is that the sitting president anoints his successor. The one exception was the 1995 AFL-CIO convention, where SEIU president John Sweeney successfully challenged AFL-CIO president Tom Donahue for the

⁴⁵ "Chicago Teamsters Patronage Scandal," September 6, 2015, Teamsters for a Democratic Union website, at https://www.tdu.org/chicago_teamsters_patronage_scandal

⁴⁶ Trip Brennan, "The Big 4: The SEIU's Most Powerful Locals," January 13, 2021, Big Tent, at <https://bluetent.us/arenas/unions/the-big-4-seiu-most-powerful-locals/>

⁴⁷ The handful of international unions where the members elect the top officers include: The United Steel Workers (USW); the Teamsters (by a 1989 court order in response to union corruption); the Laborers (LIUNA) (as part of a 1996 settlement with the Justice Department designed to purge organized crime influence); the Longshore Workers union (ILWU); the International Association of Machinists (IAM); American Postal Workers Union (APWU); and the News Guild (part of Communication Workers of America). The Unite All Workers for Democracy (UAW) caucus in the United Auto Workers union has campaigned since fall 2019, in the wake of the union's massive corruption scandal, for one member, one vote for top union officers.

leadership position.⁴⁸

Speaking of conventions, most union conventions are highly orchestrated and more show than substance – whether it is international union conventions, state union conventions, or state or national AFL-CIO conventions. Much of most unions’ convention time is devoted to Democratic Party politicians’ speeches. For many union delegates, a convention is to a significant extent a paid junket to enjoy another city’s nightlife.⁴⁹ “It’s a four day vacation for a lot of folks,” said one union activist. “No business really gets done. No organizing work gets done. No solidarity is being built.”⁵⁰

Union conventions should be lively vehicles for debate over strategies to defend unions against government and corporate attacks, to build community support, to fight for legislation benefitting all workers, and to share lessons from successful internal and new member organizing. Ideally, as happens in the UE, there would be a pre-convention period for discussion of all resolutions in local union meetings, rather than delegates only receiving resolutions when they arrive at the convention. But in the bulk of union conventions, virtually no resolutions are passed or decisions made that are not pre-approved by the top leadership. And if a rare resolution is passed that the top leadership opposed, an undemocratic leadership can simply ignore it. For example, shortly after President Bush invaded Iraq, said one unionist, “we organized successfully to get a motion passed at our international union’s convention to withdraw U.S. troops. But it didn’t mean a thing. There was no organizing, no campaign, no debates, no confrontations with Congress -- it just disappeared. It was like an email that got put into the dump file.”⁵¹

Furthermore, there is no legal right for members to vote on contracts, and an autocratic union leadership can reject a “no” vote and order re-votes on contracts. “Vote until you get it right” is the derisive phrase that union reformers use to describe this practice. A union leadership can declare that not enough members voted to reject a contract, even if a clear majority did. Teamster president Jimmy Hoffa, Jr. did this in October 2018 when United Parcel Service unionists rejected a contract, but Hoffa overruled their strike vote and ratified the contract, using the justification that just under fifty percent of UPS unionists voted. The UPS National Master Agreement covering 260,000 workers was rejected by 55% of members who voted, while the UPS Freight contract covering about 20,000 workers was rejected by 63% of members who voted.⁵²

⁴⁸ Historians will point out that in 1894 the United Mine Workers president McBride defeated Samuel Gompers for the presidency of the American Federation of Labor and served one year; Gompers then served from 1895 until his death in 1926.

⁴⁹ The best that can be said of many union conventions, leaving aside the ultra-democratic United Electrical workers and a few other unions, are the educational workshops for the delegates.

⁵⁰ Interview with unionist C, April 2021

⁵¹ Interview with unionist W, June 2021

⁵² This undemocratic rule that allowed the Teamsters’ president to impose a contract, even though the majority of members voted to reject it, was overturned at the June 2021 Teamsters’ convention. “The Two-thirds Rule is Over – We Won Majority Rule!,” June 23, 2021, Teamsters for a Democratic Union, at https://www.tdu.org/two_thirds_rule_is_over

The law also sanctions autocratic national union leaders telling local union officers that if they dare to disagree with decisions by the international leadership, they will get few services. A long-standing practice in the United Auto Workers union, for example, is for the international leadership to tell local union presidents that there will be repercussions if they do not all join the Administration Caucus. As a result, participation is nearly universal.⁵³ Loyalty to an international leadership is also bought when union presidents receive promotions to the international staff, or backing for a run for a district leadership position, based on their fealty. As well, the law allows an autocratic international union president to remove the elected dissident leadership of a local union and appoint new leaders by declaring a trusteeship.⁵⁴ The law also permits international union leaders to merge union locals in order to push out dissident elected officials.⁵⁵

A Threat to Union Democracy: Lack of Transparency

Transparency in collective bargaining means discussions between management and the union in bargaining are shared with the members. Unfortunately, the norm during labor-management negotiations, as one unionist described her local union, is that “bargaining is done completely behind closed doors. The members are never told anything during negotiations.”⁵⁶ A democratic union leadership has nothing to hide, and wants a fully informed membership.

Transparency means the leadership has no secrets from the members on a union’s political expenditures. “Open books and tight fists” is the UE phrasing – all major financial decisions are made by the membership, financial information is given to the members, the union works to ensure every expenditure of union dues is necessary, and rank-and-file trustees closely monitor union finances.⁵⁷

⁵³ A few exceptions include local union presidents who have been reform activists such as in the UAW’s New Directions Caucus in the late 1980s and early 1990s led by Jerry Tucker, or the Unite All Workers for Democracy (UAWD) caucus formed in late 2019, at uawd.org.

⁵⁴ For example, the United Food and Commercial Workers union trustee Local P-9 in Minnesota in 1985 in order to shut down their strike; and the militant Los Angeles SEIU Local 399 that led the heralded Justice for Janitors campaign was trustee when a rank-and-file caucus elected a majority to the union’s executive board.

⁵⁵ For example, the Service Employees (SEIU) first trustee – throwing out the elected leaders – and then merged a thriving Bay Area-based local of 150,000 members with the 190,000-member, Los Angeles-based SEIU Local 6434 led by Tyrone Freeman because the former was led by dissidents, and the SEIU claimed it wanted even huger local unions. Ironically, Freeman was sentenced to thirty-three months in prison in January 2013 on ten counts of corruption. “Ex-SEIU local exec convicted of stealing from low-income members,” January 28, 2013 Los Angeles Times, at <https://www.latimes.com/local/la-me-tyrone-freeman-20130129-story.html>

⁵⁶ Interview with unionist S, May 2021

⁵⁷ Interview with UE president Carl Rosen, May 2021; and “Them and Us Unionism,” UE pamphlet, *ibid*.

The 2010 Citizens United decision by the Supreme Court created transparency issues in unions. The decision has been widely denounced by progressives as allowing unlimited campaign contributions to candidates from billionaires and their front groups, and for ludicrously declaring that “corporations are people” with free speech rights to unlimited spending in campaigns. Just twelve people contributed a combined \$3.4 billion, one of thirteen of all dollars donated, to federal candidates and political groups between January 2009 and December 2020, according to the Center for Responsive Politics, which tracks money in federal elections.⁵⁸ Spending on campaigns skyrocketed starting in 2018. Pro-business groups gave \$5.9 billion between 2018 and 2020, while labor gave \$244 million, according to Opensecrets.com.⁵⁹

However, a little discussed aspect of the court’s decision opened up possibilities for unions to be far less transparent to their members about the use of union dues. A 2002 law prohibited unions from using dues money for public campaigning. Rather, dues could only be used to educate their own members about the union’s electoral preferences. Publicly campaigning required using funds from a union’s political action committee. Every union asks its members to voluntarily contribute to their union’s PAC fund. The court’s decision reversed that. Unions were freed to use dues money to publicly campaign for candidates.

The Department of Labor’s requirement that private sector unions submit annual LM-2 forms mandates that unions report how much they spend on political work each year, and those forms are available online. However, the law does not require that unions share detailed information with their members. It is a long and tedious process to go to the State Board of Elections’ website and review scores of pages to find a union’s donations to a candidate, or to go to opensecrets.com to find a union’s donations to congressional candidates. “I said that we need to tell the membership about the political donations we make that come from their dues,” said one unionist. “I was told, ‘No, we don’t have to tell them.’ Leadership said that we don’t have enough money in just our PAC, and we would never get anywhere if we only used PAC money” in our political work.⁶⁰ An honest leadership would welcome members’ questions about union finances.

In Illinois, Speaker of the House Michael Madigan insisted that unions and other donors make substantial campaign contributions to his “Friends of Michael J. Madigan” campaign fund. That way, he could dole out donations to those he viewed as loyal House members. As of the end of 2020, Madigan’s campaign fund had \$13,526,000.⁶¹ Very few union members are aware of this practice. Madigan, after 36 years in power, was voted out as speaker in January 2021 due

⁵⁸ “Oversized Influence: 12 political mega donors are responsible for \$1 of every \$13 in federal elections since Citizens United and 25% of all giving from the top 100 ZIP codes — a total of \$3.4 billion,” Center for Responsive Politics, at <https://www.issueone.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Issue-One-Oversized-Influence-Report-final.pdf>

⁵⁹ “Business-Labor-Ideology Split in PAC & Individual Donations to Candidates, Parties, Super PACs, and Outside Spending Groups,” Center for Responsive Politics, at <https://www.opensecrets.org/elections-overview/business-labor-ideology-split>

⁶⁰ Interview with unionist D, April 2021

⁶¹ Friends of Michael J. Madigan campaign fund, at <https://illinoisunshine.org/committees/friends-of-michael-j-madigan-665/>

to a corruption scandal. His successor as Speaker, Chris Welch, continues the tradition. Further, each state has limits on how much unions can donate to a political candidate in a city, county, or state race.⁶² However, a union can circumvent those limitations by giving the maximum to a candidate they endorse, but who by all indications will be victorious and does not need the funds or is not even facing an election campaign that year. The union does so with the understanding that that elected official will in turn donate that cash to a candidate who the union endorses, has received the maximum donation, and who is in a tight race and needs the funds. Unions are under no legal obligation to share this information with their members.

If union leadership is doing things that they do not want revealed to their members, then they should not be doing them. Unfortunately, it is common for members to be rebuked when they ask questions about the leadership's endorsements of and contributions to elected officials and candidates. "When we challenged political endorsements and campaign contributions to politicians who hadn't done anything for us," said one unionist, "We were told, 'This is the way it is. We have to do it.' Even though it was completely against everything we believed in."⁶³

Transparency on union finances including political donations is once again a "does the end justify the means" question. After all, goes the argument, the Citizens United decision further accelerated the dominant role of billionaires in election expenditures. Unions spend a fraction of what corporations and billionaires spend in elections. Congressional districts are bizarrely drawn by state legislatures with the intent that one party will always win.

Under those circumstances, is it ethical for unions to circumvent the law on campaign contributions? Is it ethical to keep information from the members so that it doesn't get coverage in the media, creating a negative backlash? Shouldn't the union's elected leaders be trusted to make these decisions without members asking questions? The answer to those questions are "no," "no," and "no." Hiding information from the members in the name of a greater good is a step down the road toward an undemocratic, top-down, secretive union.

A Threat to Union Democracy: Manipulating Members to Ratify a Contract

The film "American Dream" about a 1985 strike by Hormel workers in Austin, Minnesota, which won the 1991 Academy Award for best documentary, provides examples of a union leader bullying and manipulating members during contract negotiations.⁶⁴ Director Barbara Kopple

⁶² National Conference of State Legislatures, chart showing state limits on contributions to candidates 2019-2020 election cycle, at <https://www.ncsl.org/Portals/1/Documents/Elections/Contribution-Limits-to-Candidates-2019-2020.pdf?ver=2019-10-02-132802-117>. "A Guide to Campaign Disclosure," Illinois State Board of Elections," at

["https://www.elections.il.gov/downloads/campaigndisclosure/pdf/campdiscguide.pdf"](https://www.elections.il.gov/downloads/campaigndisclosure/pdf/campdiscguide.pdf)

⁶³ Interview with unionist S, May 2021

⁶⁴ "American Dream" directed by Barbara Kopple is available for free at https://archive.org/details/americanream_201908

interviewed United Food and Commercial Worker’s international union representative Lewie Anderson, who assisted UFCW’s Midwest local unions in bargaining. A powerful scene captures the affliction of union leaders thinking that they are a third party whose job is to be a “reasonable mediator” who can persuade both what the union staffer views as the unruly workers and overreaching management to come to an agreement. Anderson gives a militant speech to workers at a Swift meatpacking local. Then he explains his speech in an interview with Kopple, saying, “There’s always a danger when you fire up the troops. You get their expectations up, and they really believe those expectations can be met.” In this leadership view, the members are pawns in a chess game that the international union is playing. When the Swift local’s bargaining team gets upset with his acceptance of concessions, Anderson screams and cusses at them and throws a chair across the room, with the intention of intimidating them into agreeing to the concessionary contract. This is abuse of power. This is manipulating the members into doing what the top union leaders want done.

Scaremongering the membership to vote for a contract the leadership has deemed acceptable is, again, not reserved for the most top-down unions; the most progressive unions can slip into this undemocratic mode as well. “We need to trust the rank-and-file members more,” said one unionist. “In bargaining, we really should be fighting as leaders for what the rank-and-file want us to achieve. It shouldn’t be just what the officers *think* we can achieve. If the members tell us, ‘This is what we’re willing to fight for,’ then we have to do it. There is too much of an attitude of the leadership as the masterminds and the members as the foot soldiers. Our members are much more than that.”⁶⁵ “The state leadership,” said another unionist, “browbeat our bargaining committee. They all had the same line in negotiations: ‘This is the best you can get. If you tell your members to vote no, you won’t get more. You have to be realistic.’”⁶⁶

Union leaders who lie to their members in order to manipulate them into voting for a contract are perverting union democracy. Before a strike, members may be falsely told that if they reject a contract the only alternative is a strike. Public sector unionists, where strikes are relatively brief compared to the private sector, may be told by the leadership that if they vote to strike it is guaranteed to last many weeks. During a strike, members may be falsely told that they will lose their health insurance and face catastrophic costs if the strike is not immediately ended and the contract signed.⁶⁷ They may be falsely told that if the members do not accept the contract, then management will withdraw key gains. Or in a public sector strike, they may be

⁶⁵ Interview with unionist B, April 2021

⁶⁶ Interview with unionist W, June 2021

⁶⁷ The Consolidated Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act (COBRA) allows strikers to continue their health benefits if their employer cuts off benefits. An employer cutting off health care takes the risk of a public backlash against this unfair action, and public sector employers like mayors would be more vulnerable if they were to take this action against striking teachers or city employees. Strikers have at least 60 days to elect coverage, which is in effect from the day coverage ended, and another 45 days before the first premium payment is due. While coverage is expensive, if it is only for a short period, this isn’t a concern. Strikers also have 60 days under the Affordable Care Act (ObamaCare) to find a temporary policy on the health care exchange.

falsely told that management will get a court to declare the strike illegal and gains will be lost. Union staff may be ordered to text members to vote “yes” on a tentative agreement.

Several unionists interviewed for this paper expressed their anger when told that the members must be obedient soldiers. “Our leadership said during a strike,” said one unionist, “when members of the bargaining team raised some concerns about the wording of officers’ press statements, ‘In time of war, soldiers need to take orders from generals.’”⁶⁸ This comes back to the misguided perspective that the members have nothing useful to say; that the top leaders always know best; and that the top leaders should not be challenged when they issue commands.

One test of how much the leadership trusts the membership is, leading up to a strike after the union has a discussion on its message, whether members are encouraged to tell their stories to the media. A union is weakened when the leadership insists the media only talk to the officers or staff, or that members approached by the media must read a statement that the union gave them.

Returning to the documentary “American Dream,” in negotiations with the Wilson Foods meatpacking company, UFCW rep Lewie Anderson met separately with the lead management negotiator and then then bulldozed the local into accepting a concession contract. This violates a cardinal rule of union democracy that no union leader meets secretly with management, ignoring the union’s elected bargaining committee and making backroom deals on a contract.

Unfortunately most local unions agree to management’s proposal, before bargaining begins, that both sides keep all discussions secret until a tentative agreement is ready to submit to the members for a vote. However, increasingly unions are rejecting secrecy because it leads to an uninvolved membership, wild rumors, and paranoia that the leaders are selling out the members. Instead, many local unions form a larger “big bargaining” team who sit in on negotiations (but aren’t usually at the table talking), and are available to caucus to discuss specific contract language. A key task of these members is to share what they learn with the rank-and-file they work with, so workers understand management’s demands, which also enables the union to get members to participate in “contract campaign” work actions to pressure management.

A second anti-democratic example during the Hormel strike was exhibited by UFCW Vice-president Joe Hansen, who oversaw the international’s shutting down the strike by trusteeing Local P-9. Hansen said that the UFCW only allowed the strike in order to let the local “get it out of their system,” not to mobilize labor and community support to actually win the local union’s anti-austerity demands.⁶⁹ While phrases like allowing members to strike to “get it out of their system” or to “let the steam out” are not often publicly expressed by union leaders, labor reformers sometimes charge union leaders with allowing a short strike so the members, exhausted and broke weeks later, will vote to accept concessions. For example, dissidents in the United Auto Workers, who in the wake of the corruption scandal have formed the Unite All Workers for

⁶⁸ Interview with unionist I, May 2021

⁶⁹ “Officials charge P-9 didn't want settlement,” *Minnesota Daily*, July 18, 1986, cited in Green, *On Strike at Hormel*, *ibid*, 298.

Democracy caucus, argue that UAW leaders did not authorize the September 2019 General Motors strike with an intent to wage an aggressive campaign, but instead with the purpose of exhausting the members because “the contract we ended up agreeing to would never have passed if we hadn’t been starved out for six weeks.”⁷⁰

A Threat to Union Democracy: Bullying the Members

Union democracy is also very much about how the union’s officers and staff relate to the members. Here again, union democracy is not a victory achieved; it is an ongoing process that can involve tension, mistakes, corrections, and setbacks. No union officer or staffer, no matter their brilliant militant history, is immune to the pressures to bypass, for the alleged greater good of the membership, democratic practices.

Union democracy is messy and time-consuming. Union democracy takes more time than rushing through a union meeting or executive board discussion to get a quick decision. Union democracy means, for example, rank-and-file unionists working in union committees that have real credibility and purpose, rather than either the leadership choosing committee members that will ensure the committee rubber stamps the leadership’s recommendations, or the leadership ignores the rank-and-file committee’s proposals.

Union democracy means the leadership has to trust the membership. Union democracy means leaders keeping their ego in check. As one unionist put it, “It’s like my president’s ego became threatened by dissent. She took it personally. Like if you disagree, she took it to mean ‘You’re against me, I’m not doing a good job.’”⁷¹ Added another unionist, “Organizing is about amplifying the power and the agency of the community or of union members. Your experience doesn’t trump any others. The danger is always there that, when you’re elected to leadership, you will amplify yourself. The danger is you will fall in love with your own point of view.”⁷²

Decades ago, there were instances in a handful of unions where dissenters at union meetings would be beaten up. Those days are gone. Nevertheless, there are a myriad of other ways that dissenters can be intimidated into silence. When members challenge a leader’s position, a too common undemocratic response is that the members should trust the leadership because the leaders have extensive experience and insider knowledge, and know what is best for the local union. Another problem is when elected leaders and their supporters rally around the leadership by challenging the loyalty of dissenters. In this convoluted view of unionism, being loyal to the elected leadership means not challenging their decisions or recommendations. Dissenters are told that if they criticize the union leadership, then they are being divisive, and that they are providing ammunition to the employer and to anti-union forces. “We need to learn how to have

⁷⁰ Interview with Justin Mayhugh, an activist in UAW Local 31 at GM’s Fairfax Assembly Plant in Kansas City and a founding member of UAWD, Mark Brooks, “Democratizing the UAW,” undated but around December 2019 Jacobin, at <https://jacobinmag.com/2019/12/united-automobile-workers-uaw-general-motors>

⁷¹ Interview with unionist B, April 2021

⁷² Interview with unionist G, May 2021

difficult conversations without it immediately being flipped into nasty accusations and personal attacks,” said one unionist. “Any critique of the leadership is seen as an attack on unions and people of color. We are told that we are pro-rightwing when we raise criticisms, that we are aiding our enemies, and that we are being disloyal. It is vicious character assassination.”⁷³

Members can be told that challenging leadership decisions is a personal attack on hardworking elected leaders. Dissenters can be labeled as “crazy.” The cliché that “you are either with us or against us,” where “you” are the members and “us” is the elected union officers, is anathema to union democracy. “There is this ‘we know better than you attitude,’” said one unionist. “Leadership says ‘trust us. If you question us, then you’re against us.’”⁷⁴ On the executive board, said another unionist, “any type of pushback is met with hostility. Any question is dealt with as if it were an attack. Any question is answered with ‘You don’t know what you’re talking about.’”⁷⁵ “The leadership pushes their agenda on folks, rather than hearing from the members about their concerns,” said one unionist. “Leadership browbeats people into doing what they want to do. They’re all for democracy, until it’s inconvenient to do what they want to do.”⁷⁶

Furthermore, a union officer chairing a meeting has enormous power. They can speak for as long as they want, while a rank-and-file dissenter has to adhere to the two or three minute time limit. A common undemocratic way to run union or executive board meetings, as Andover Education Association president Matt Bach reports, is to bore people to death. “The [previous] president’s report used to drive people out of the meeting. She would drone on and on. There was a ton of filibustering.”⁷⁷ The president’s report at union meetings, said another unionist, is an hour of “pontificating, basically propaganda.”⁷⁸

Undemocratic union leaders can personally attack, insult, and humiliate dissenters. They can falsely put absurd words in a dissenter’s mouth then denounce them in classic “straw man” arguments. They can condescend to dissenters, implying they are too stupid to understand the issues. They can allow hecklers to disrupt and insult a member disagreeing with the leadership’s viewpoint. In the building trades where hiring halls are common, autocratic officers can work with union contractors to deny work to members who question union leadership.

Sometimes leaders use the stick – verbal abuse – and sometimes they use the carrot to bribe reformers. “Our local union’s leaders,” said one unionist, “feed off a person’s need for survival and comfort. They say, ‘I’m going to look out for you, because you’re loyal.’ They do special favors. They give extra support if there is a hostile supervisor.”⁷⁹

⁷³ Interview with unionist C, April 2021.

⁷⁴ Interview with unionist B, April 2021

⁷⁵ Interview with unionist M, May 2021

⁷⁶ Interview with unionist S, May 2021

⁷⁷ Interview with Matt Bach, president of the Andover Educators Association (Massachusetts), National Education Association, May 2021

⁷⁸ Interview with unionist L, May 2021

⁷⁹ Interview with unionist L, May 2021

An additional threat to full member participation in unions, which is integral to union democracy, is racial and gender discrimination. Discrimination within labor's ranks violates fundamental labor principles of fairness, equality, and justice. Unfortunately, throughout labor's history some white male leaders have been comfortable with an elected leadership that does not reflect the faces of its members. As an AFL-CIO convention resolution stated in 2005, "In too many cases, women and people of color still are underrepresented among union leadership. It is understandable that many women and people of color -- the workers who are among those with the most to gain from union membership and who are most actively organizing today -- do not feel welcome."⁸⁰

"Leadership is more interested in staying in power than having a political fight over why women's rights are important," said one unionist. "They don't understand that if we're keeping the sisters down, it's keeping the union down. There is a lot of great rhetoric from the international union on women's rights. They are great on paper. But there is a huge disconnect when it comes to practice. There is a wretched culture of sexism in the union. It would go a long way if guys felt there would be repercussions from union leadership if they harassed or discriminated against women."⁸¹

America's unions in the 21st century take powerful positions against racism and sexism, but more needs to be done to ally organized labor with the Black Lives Matter and women's rights movements, and to mentor women and workers of color to be union leaders.⁸² America's labor leadership is too white and too male, although that is slowly changing.⁸³ Two of the three top AFL-CIO officers in 2021 are a white woman and a black man; a woman has been among the top three officers since 1995; and eleven of the fifty-two Executive Council members are women and fourteen are people of color. But labor, like all institutions in America, is not immune to sexual and racial harassment. A full analysis of this crucial topic is beyond the scope of this article.

However, as we steadily elect more people of color to run our unions, it also happens that cynical leaders use the real atrocity of racism to reinforce autocratic power. Leaders can distort the real existence of white privilege to warn dissenters that if they continue to disagree with an elected official who is a person of color, then they will be labeled as a racist. "I've been told that I cannot criticize or disagree with a union leader who is a person of color, because I am white," said one unionist. "It's not about fighting racism. It's about weaponizing race to get your way. Being labeled a racist is the one thing that, when you're a progressive person, you don't want to

⁸⁰ "Resolution 2: A Diverse Movement Calls for Diverse Leadership," July 25, 2005 AFL-CIO Convention, at <https://aflcio.org/resolution/diverse-movement-calls-diverse-leadership>. Also see "AFL-CIO Creates New Task Force on Racial Justice," July 10, 2020, at <https://aflcio.org/press/releases/afl-cio-creates-new-task-force-racial-justice>

⁸¹ Interview with unionist U, June 2021

⁸² For an excellent review of gender discrimination issues within labor, see Ava Avendano, "#MeToo Inside the Labor Movement," January 2019 *New Labor Forum*, at <https://newlaborforum.cuny.edu/2019/01/24/metoo-inside-the-labor-movement/>

⁸³ See, for example, "15 Black Union Leaders Making Their Marks on the Labor Movement," October 20, 2020 UnionTrack, at <https://www.uniontrack.com/blog/black-union-leaders>

hear or be called.”⁸⁴ “It took me years,” said another unionist, “to realize that the charges of racism weren’t about me. I examined my own self and looked internally at what I might be doing wrong. And I finally realized that I was being gaslighted, that it was a method to discredit me.”⁸⁵

Conclusion

Can we prioritize different types of undemocratic behavior? Clearly, the worst violation is corruption – stealing from the union treasury or taking bribes or kickbacks from employers. Perhaps the least terrible undemocratic action is too-high salaries and perks. However, union democracy is like a four-legged chair; if it has three strong legs, and one short one, it still wobbles and therefore weakens workers’ power. One might argue, for example, that it’s good enough if a union president makes a fair salary, has a militant social justice program, doesn’t use the union treasury to donate to candidates without a vote of the membership – and we should overlook that the president also bullies and demeans any member raising questions or a different view. In the end, this is just quibbling -- trying to justify undemocratic actions that hurt the labor movement.

The reality is that politics in America is corrupt. However, you don’t fight corruption in politics by becoming equally corrupt. That corrupt reality should not subvert our ideals as unionists. The ends – doing good things for working people – do not justify undemocratic behavior.

In a famous quote, the nineteenth century British politician Lord Acton argued that “power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely.” The history of the world gives ample evidence of the validity of this proposition. Any leader – whether of a government body, an organization, a corporation, or a union -- is susceptible to the addictive elixir of power.

But the key phrase is “tends to corrupt.” Abuse of power is not guaranteed. It can be prevented. But no country, no organization, and no union can rely on the good will of leaders to do so. The only way to get, to keep, and to expand democracy is through the organized pressure of the people.

The only way to make our unions fully democratic is for the members to demand it. As one unionist concluded, “I have examples from my local that leadership doesn’t always get what it wants. But, it only happens when the membership pushes back.”⁸⁶ As Andover Educators Association President Matt Bach has experienced, “When you start opening up a space for union democracy, you’re going to be impressed by the people who now are willing to do and are capable of doing things, just by giving them the opportunity to participate. It has been a great, positive, really impressive experience. It’s a simple reality that when people can see they’re part

⁸⁴ Interview with unionist C, April 2021

⁸⁵ Interview with unionist J, May 2021

⁸⁶ Interview with unionist I, May 2021

of the decision-making process in a democratic system, they're willing to take leadership roles.”⁸⁷

The only way to ensure union leaders embrace the power of an actively engaged membership is to elect leaders who run on a democratic platform, then monitor their behavior, demand transparency, and hold leaders accountable to their members. As one unionist said, “The whole power corrupts idea is what happens unless you actively have people that are fighting to make sure things stay democratic.”⁸⁸ The future of the labor movement is riding on it.

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⁸⁷ Interview with Matt Bach, president of the Andover Educators Association (Massachusetts), National Education Association, May 2021

⁸⁸ Interview with unionist C, April 2021

