SUGGESTIONS AND DEBATES

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WHICH SIDE ARE THEY ON?

Some Suggestions for the Labour Bureaucracy Debate*

The debate over the labour bureaucracy has changed considerably since Robert Michels first argued that oligarchy was inevitable whenever humans organized. Recent work has tended to play down the notion of the labour bureaucracy as a body distinct from, and often in opposition to, the rank and file. Indeed, in the pages of this journal, Jonathan Zeitlin has maintained that "no clear line can be drawn between trade union officials and the 'rank and file' ". Carrying this argument to its logical conclusion Zeitlin has urged that the " 'rank and filist' paradigm is fundamentally unsatisfactory and should be abandoned rather than further refined". Though others would not push the revisionist argument this far, the general tendency has been to agree that the earlier generalizations were over-blown and that it is difficult to distinguish between bureaucrats and members. Many of Zeitlin's earlier opponents now appear to be nearly indistinguishable from him, and few argue that the interests of the labour leadership differ in any important degree from those of the rank and file. I believe, however, that the reports of the demise of the labour bureaucrat have been somewhat exaggerated. This paper will argue that though the argument needs to be re-formulated, the paradigm of the labour bureaucracy remains a useful one. Such a reformulation must shift the focus from differences of ideology separating the leaders from the members and instead must turn to an analysis of the power relationship between the two. This paper will trace the recent twists and turns in the debate and will suggest ways in which it is possible to view the labour bureaucracy as a distinct layer of the union movement.[1]

In the late 1940s, C. Wright Mills noted that a paradox faced the labour movement. Trade unions, whether the leader knew it or not, "and often he

* The author would like to thank Annette DeFaveri, G.S. Kealey, Sean Cadigan, and Irene Whitfield for their help and comments.

[1] Jonathan Zeitlin, "'Rank and Filism' in British Labour History: A Critique", *International Review of Social History*, Volume XXXIV (1989), p. 60. See also in this volume the responses of Richard Price and James Cronin, as well as Zeitlin's rejoinder.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020859000110703 Published online by Cambridge University Press

seems not to know", were fundamentally at odds with capital. The fight for the closed shop was a fight against freedom of contract; fights for improvements in conditions and control encroached upon the alleged rights of management; fights for higher wages attacked the "uncontrolled sway of property". But instead of acting as a force that was opposed to capital, union leaders were, sometimes tacitly, sometimes openly, seeking to cooperate with it. In return for some reforms – union recognition, dues check-offs, grievance procedures, explicit work rules, stability, and higher wages – leaders were conceding too much ground to employers. Signing the collective agreement meant that workplace protests could no longer be made by the workers themselves. In North America slow-downs, deputations, wildcats, study sessions, in fact any work stoppage or disruption, were now illegal during the life of a collective agreement. Protest could only be made through the grievance procedure, and arbitration was interpreted by lawyers and industrial relations experts who were committed to capitalism and capitalist law. While the union's rights and obligations were clearly defined, every contract, whether it contained a "management's rights" clause or not, gave the employer all residual and non-specified rights. This meant that only actions that actually violated a specific clause of the contract could be grieved. If workers protested against actions that were not clear violations of the agreement, or if they protested in ways other than the grievance procedure, the union was held legally responsible. To avoid law suits, fines, and even jail, union leaders had to act as policemen, making sure that the workers obeyed the letter and spirit of the contract. Now the union leaders, not management, had to prevent and end work stoppages. The very processes and procedures that unions had fought for now meant that their struggle was severely limited and that the interests of leaders and members often came into conflict. In short, the leaders, in seeking to protect their members and the union, had embarked on a course that was contrary to the best interests of the membership. Some leaders had openly sought such a course; others had drifted into it. In any case, these "new men of power" had to move to the left and democratize the union, industry, and society. Only in this way could the interests of the working class be fulfilled.[2]

By the 1960s and 1970s, it was clear to a new generation of activists and radicals that the "new men of power" had not lived up to the responsibility Mills had charged them with. Identifying the bureaucracy as the top level of old-time union leaders, writers focused on the violations of union constitutions, the subversion of the electoral process, and the corruption symbolized by Jimmy Hoffa. The accounts were largely journalistic; the early

[2] C. Wright Mills, *The New Men of Power: America's Labor Leaders* (New York, 1948), pp. 7–9, 224–229, 239–265.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020859000110703 Published online by Cambridge University Press

literature set out little analysis beyond painting wealthy union leaders as sell-outs and crooks.[3] Later work offered more complex analyses that took Mills as a starting point, and looked for structural, rather than personal, reasons for the bureaucratic union leadership.

Stan Weir's work is typical of this school. Weir argued that the unions of the Congress of Industrial Organizations, or CIO, were led into what he called "institutionalized bargaining" by naive or corrupt union officials. Institutional bargaining came about when all the corporations in a given industry agreed together to recognize the union and begin collective bargaining. Until all agreed to recognize the union, individual companies were not forced to bargain in good faith, and could try to fight the unions. But a militant and radical rank and file created chaos: wildcat strikes, sit-downs, and slow-downs plagued industry. At that point, employers recognized that the refusal to meet with the unions was costing too much; at the same time, their prolonged and often violent rejection of organization attempts meant that the corporations had lost their recognized authority to control and discipline the work force. They needed a substitute authority, and believed they could use the union leadership to maintain order on the shop floor. Now eager to accept unions, the companies agreed to sit down and bargain, confident that they could institutionalize the union leadership and the members. Once the contract was signed, the union leadership had to be concerned with the employers' well-being. This meant backing off during negotiations, working towards industry-wide agreements to ensure equal advantage to individual companies, and, most importantly, making sure the militant work force went along with the new conservatism. This put the leadership in direct conflict with the rank and file, and meant it would have to assume bureaucratic control if it were to remain in power.[4]

Weir's argument is somewhat overstated. Borrowing heavily from the work of Gabriel Kolko and James Weinstein, it sees every reform and advance as the result of a conscious scheme on the part of corporate leadership, working with government and unions to create stability and growth that all agree is desirable. Reforms and advances are seen not as the result of class conflict, but as the result of the collaboration of elites who are in substantial agreement.[5] Certainly capital is often very flexible, and it has

[3] See Burton Hall (ed.), *Autocracy and Insurgency in Organized Labor* (New Brunswick, 1972), for a collection of essays on this theme.
[4] Stan Weir, "The Conflict in American Unions and the Resistance to Alternative Ideas from the Rank and File", in James Green (ed.), *Workers' Struggles, Past and Present: A "Radical America" Reader* (Philadelphia, 1983), pp. 251–268. *Radical America* has advanced a number of variations of this theme in its pages. Staughton Lynd has made similar arguments, most recently in "Trade Unionism in the USA", *New Left Review*, 184 (1990), (November/December), pp. 76–87.
[5] Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge, 1988), p. 439; Gabriel Kolko, *The Triumph of Con-*

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020859000110703 Published online by Cambridge University Press

shown a remarkable ability to adapt pressures for change to forms that are less dangerous to it. But this flexibility is not the same as cunning or conspiracy; it is more a bowing to the inevitable. It is clear that the industries organized by the CIO in the 1930s and 1940s did not have a united vision of institutionalizing the unions. The Ford company, for example, resisted unionization for three years after the other manufacturers had capitulated; likewise, "Little Steel" fought the Steelworkers to a standstill even though "Big Steel" settled. Furthermore, the far-sightedness attributed to capital is questionable. The inability of the companies to unite in the face of the union onslaught suggests that they do not always have the foresight or interest to develop joint plans that include the sophisticated notion of corporatism. And it is by no means self-evident that corporate leaders, government officials, and labour leaders were in substantial agreement over the desirability of tripartism as earlier and later periods of repression suggest. Most of the "solutions" to labour conflict were in fact put in place by the liberal state, not capital. Indeed, capital has fought, and continues to fight, the closed shop, social welfare legislation, and the state's guarantees of union rights. Moreover, the "post-war consensus" and the reformism of the 1940s and 1950s appears to haven broken down in the 1980s and 1990s.

The portrayal of the union is similarly too rigid. Weir identifies bureaucracy as an upper stratum of leadership that differs from the rank and file by material interest and ideology. This definition does not take into account the concept of power, as his bureaucrats are defined by their political policy, not their relationship to rank-and-file control. Good leaders are those who assume the working class is radical; bureaucrats are bad leaders who assume the working class is, or ought to be, conservative. Weir's underlying assumption is that the rank and file is always more militant than the leadership. But this is a dubious assertion. One critic has noted that while there are many cases where leaders restrained a militant membership, there are an equal number of cases where militant leaders had to drag along reluctant, more conservative rank-and-file members. John Bodnar has collected a volume of oral testimony that shows persuasively that many CIO rank and filers were not interested in revolution. They favoured a pragmatic bread and butter unionism, and supported Communist organizers and leaders because they were better tacticians. The rank and file did not support those who talked about revolution. In the 1940s and 1950s, a "white" cadre was able to muster considerable rank-and-file support to oust the "red" leadership of the International Woodworkers of America,

servatism (New York, 1963); James Weinstein, *The Corporate Ideal in the Liberal State* (Boston, 1968). For a Canadian analysis along similar lines, see Alvin Finkel, *Business and Social Reform in the Thirties* (Toronto, 1979).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020859000110703 Published online by Cambridge University Press

the Boilermakers, and the United Auto Workers in Canada and the United States. Whatever the merits of either faction, and even allowing for a great deal of skulduggery by the "whites", the purges are a clear example of a less radical membership repudiating a left leadership. Where the "reds" held on, as in Mine-Mill and the United Electrical Workers, it was their skills as unionists, not their political views, that kept them in power. Canadian Communist Jack Scott made this clear, declaring to mineworkers who questioned his beliefs, "My politics are none of your business unless my politics affect my union activities".[6]

In attributing the label bureaucracy to a top level of union leaders who actively oppose the real interests of the working class, Weir does not go far beyond an analysis that views the bureaucrats as simple traitors or "sell-outs". The other side of this argument is that the rank and file is powerless to fight against measures it clearly recognizes as being against its best interests. This may be true in some cases, especially when a corrupt leadership has no qualms about the use of thugs to maintain its control. But in many instances, it is not obvious that workers either acquiesce or see their interests as opposed to the policy of the leadership.

James Hinton and Richard Price have put forward arguments similar to Weir's for the British union movement. Unlike Weir, however, they see the move to bureaucracy occurring in the late nineteenth century, as the push for de-skilling encouraged rank and filers to find new ways to fight for job control. But they were hampered in their struggle by the union leadership, which sought refuge in centralized conciliation boards, larger bargaining units, national agreements, and centralized unions. The rank and file, they argue, fought the bureaucratizing efforts of union leaders as they fought for job control.[7] But recent work has contradicted important elements of their theory. In his examination of British railway unions, Tony Adams has found that there is no evidence to "suggest that the 'rank and file' or indeed union activists on the railways opposed centralized conciliation schemes", while the executive of the National Union of Railwaymen was pressured into centralized bargaining by the District Councils. And it was left-wing activists outside the union bureaucracy who pushed for centralized bargaining, for it would give the union greater clout and weaken sectional interests

[6] Jonathan Zeitlin, "Trade Unions and Job Control: A critique of rank and filism", *Society for the Study of Labour History*, 46 (1983), p. 7; John Bodnar, *Workers' World: Kinship, Community and Protest in an Industrial Society, 1900–1940* (Bloomington, 1985). Most histories of the Communist Party make similar claims about popular support for activists rather than ideologues. Bryan D. Palmer (ed.), *Jack Scott: A Communist Life* (St. John's, Newfoundland: Committee on Canadian Labour History, 1988), p. 101.

[7] James Hinton, *The First Shop Stewards' Movement* (London, 1973); Hinton, *Labour and Socialism: A History of the British Labour Movement, 1867–1974* (Amherst, 1983); Richard Price, *Masters, Unions, and Men: Work Control in Building and the Rise of Labour, 1830–1914* (Cambridge, 1980).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020859000110703 Published online by Cambridge University Press

in favour of industrial and class consciousness. Far from union leaders, the state, and business being in agreement over the virtues of institutionalized bargaining, Adams argues that the rail companies opposed it, and were forced into nation-wide bargaining by the unions and the state. Similarly, Jonathan Zeitlin has argued that in the Amalgamated Society of Engineers, centralization was promoted by a "socialist-led 'rank and file' campaign", while local autonomy was defended by levels of the official hierarchy and by "formal representative bodies within the union itself, rather than by 'informal' groups on the shop floor". Their research has led both Adams and Zeitlin to suggest that it is impossible to "draw a clear line of demarcation between trade union officials and the rank and file".[8]

Richard Hyman has tried to accommodate some of these objections while still maintaining that union leaders tend to act as policemen and tend to incorporate unions into the status quo. In order to present a united front and coordinate effective action, he suggests, unions must formalize some control over the membership. In order to achieve their collective ends, the members must be able to apply some pressure to reluctant fellow workers; at the very least, the union must be able to decide and act on policies established for the good of all. Hyman calls for a reformulation of Michels: "who says organization says, firstly discipline, secondly routinisation". From the union's beginning, then, there is a tension between leaders and led, between the use of "power for the members" and "power over the members". Outside of a revolutionary situation, unions must, by the very nature of the bargaining process, come to some kind of accommodation with capital. In addition, the work process itself creates conflicts on the shop floor that cannot be resolved by the grievance procedure or sophisticated managerial techniques. The day-to-day alienation and exploitation of the workers means they will periodically strike back spontaneously, sometimes united and organized with specific grievances, sometimes not. The union, however, must intervene to quell the illegal action and uphold the contract. This may mean repressing militants; it may mean coercing conservatives. Other pressures, more subtle than a desire to sell-out, come to bear on union leaders. They have a responsibility to make sure the union survives, and this may encourage conservatism. It is especially liable to "induce resistance to objectives or forms of action which unduly antagonize employers or the state and thus risk violent confrontation". Since union officers must come to terms with employers at the bargaining table and during grievance procedures, they have an ongoing relationship with their

[8] Tony Adams, "Leadership and Oligarchy: British Rail Unions, 1914–1922", *Studies in History and Politics*, 5 (1986), pp. 23–45; Zeitlin, "Trade Unions". See also Zeitlin, "Shop floor bargaining and the state: a contradictory relationship", in Steve Tolliday and Jonathan Zeitlin (eds), *Shop Floor Bargaining and the State: Historical and Comparative Perspectives* (Cambridge, 1985).

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counterparts across the table. It is often useful to encourage a certain stability in the relationship, and thus there is a built-in tendency to go along with the "rules of the game". Finally, leadership positions were, at least in part, created to put experts at the head of the union, for the best interests of the collectivity. In order to expand and maintain their positions, leaders come to define trade-union activity in ways that emphasize expertise and hierarchy: they tend to stress "professional competence" rather than mass action to resolve problems and advance the union cause. The state's use of complex legislation, government labour boards, and legal arbitration has encouraged this as well. These forces may intensify and reinforce each other; together, they pressure leaders to move towards reformism and bureaucratic control over the membership. In this view, the problems attributed to the labour bureaucracy are often problems inherent to trade unionism in capitalist society. Hyman goes so far as to suggest, in language similar to that of incorporation thesis critics, that

> there is an important sense in which the problem of "bureaucracy" denotes not so much a distinct stratum of personnel as a relationship which permeates the whole practice of trade unionism. "Bureaucracy" is in large measure a question of the differential distribution of expertise and activism: of the dependence of the mass of union membership on the initiative and strategic experience of a relatively small cadre of leadership – both "official" and "unofficial". Such dependence may be deliberately fostered by an officialdom which strives to maintain a monopoly of information, experience, and negotiating opportunities, and to minimise and control the collective contacts among the membership. But [. . .] [this] constitutes a problem even in the case of a cadre of militant lay activists sensitive to the need to encourage the autonomy and initiative of the membership. Hence the predicament of [even] the stewards [who are] [. . .] "torn between the forces of representation and bureaucratization."[9]

The net effect of this refined statement of the incorporation thesis has been, in the words of Eric Hobsbawm, to destroy the theory of the labour bureaucracy as a "conflict between a theoretically militant rank and file and the theoretically conservative union leadership".[10] It has also made an

[9] Richard Hyman, *Industrial Relations: A Marxist Introduction* (London, 1975), pp. 64–93; Hyman, "The Politics of Workplace Trade Unionism: Recent Tendencies and Some Problems for Theory", *Capital and Class*, 8 (Summer 1979), pp. 54–67. The block quote may be found on p. 61. Compare this with Zeitlin, "Trade Unions": "Externally, trade unions are torn between the demands of opposition and accommodation; internally, between those of centralisation and mobilisation", p. 7. See also Hyman, "Officialdom and opposition: Leadership and rank and file in Trade Unions", *Bulletin of the Society for the Study of Labour History*, 46 (Spring 1983), p. 7. For an excellent summary of much of the debate, see John Kelly, *Trade Unions and Socialist Politics* (London, 1988), especially chapter 7, and the "Suggestions and Debates" in *International Review of Social History*, Volume XXXIV (1989), pp. 42–102.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020859000110703 Published online by Cambridge University Press

important distinction between rank-and-file activity and the (usually) left-wing opposition of factions acting in the name of the rank and file. The model of competing elites is a more accurate description of this opposition than the dichotomy of leaders versus members. But in refining the incorporation argument, its supporters have done away with much of its explanatory power. If bureaucracy is a "tendency" or a "tension" that ebbs and flows, how are we to define bureaucrats? Since leaders cannot simply assert their authority, but, in the words of Zeitlin, must continually "re-establish their claim to the active loyalty of the members", is there any conflict between officials and rank and file? Zeitlin has argued that the notion of a fundamental split between rank and file and leadership is "fundamentally unsatisfactory and should be abandoned outright".[11]

Is it useful then to think in terms of a labour bureaucracy that functions as a hierarchy distinct from those it was created to serve? I believe it is, but several points must be clarified.

First, Zeitlin's contention that the leadership is democratic because it must continually seek support and loyalty is false. Obtaining consent from the ruled is not the same as democracy. Even dictatorships must get some consent from the masses, a rather different scenario than actual control by the collectivity. Furthermore, examples of local leaders fighting centralization are not really comments on democracy and bureaucracy; they are more akin to the struggles of feudal barons against the king. Zeitlin's argument is essentially a return to the liberal vision of formal elections and responsible leadership typified by Seymour Martin Lipset in the 1950s.[12]

Second, the labour bureaucracy cannot be identified by ideology or certain policies of reform or conservatism. Leaders may be left or right, as may members. Nor can militancy be the defining characteristic. Hyman has argued persuasively that a tendency towards less militant action does affect the leadership, but it is not inevitable, and may not be contrary to the wishes of the rank and file, though it may be contrary to the wishes of a political faction.

Third, the bureaucracy cannot be defined solely by its relationship to incorporation. While unions have been largely incorporated into capitalism and are usually agents only for reform, this is an issue separate from bureaucracy. Some leaders have moved quickly and openly to reach an accommodation with capital; others have done so reluctantly, or, in the absence of a militant rank and file, by default. Hyman has argued rightly that this is a problem inherent in trade unionism, and it cannot be pinned

[10] Cited in "Discussion", *Bulletin of the Society for the Study of Labour History*, 46 (Spring 1983), p. 7.
[11] Zeitlin, "Trade Unions", p. 7.
[12] Seymour Martin Lipset, Martin Trow and James Coleman, *Union Democracy: The Internal Politics of the International Typographical Union* (Glencoe, 1956).

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squarely on the bureaucracy. The rank and file has not always acted as the implacable foe of incorporation, and its conservatism – a tendency as marked as its radicalism – has sometimes pushed leaders to see the contract as the only means of guaranteeing rights and union protection.

If the bureaucracy does have a consistent ideology and program, it is more profound and subtle than most incorporation theorists have argued. It may be found in the bureaucrats' belief that the working class must be managed, that the masses cannot determine their own struggles. This deep-rooted position is common in the work of every theorist of the labour bureaucracy, from Adams to Hyman to Michels to Zeitlin. Liberals are quick to argue that hierarchy is necessary, but Marxist writers are in a quandary that weakens their position. They cannot denounce the principle of leadership, for they are committed to a specific political agenda that can only be realized by a working class united in a carefully defined direction. Therefore, they must argue for a certain kind of leadership, moving towards a specific objective. Since this direction is not always the same one the masses are heading in, these writers face a constant dilemma. They must argue for working-class autonomy when the class supports their program, and against it when it does not. The leadership is similarly "good" or "bad" according to how closely it conforms to what is considered the proper political agenda. But the bureaucracy can only be defined by its relationship to the rank and file. The distinguishing characteristic of the labour bureaucrats is their power over the membership. It is this power, however obtained – by force, manipulation, expertise, or consent – and institutionalized in formal offices, that defines the labour bureaucrat, no matter what ends the power is used for. The power may be overt, complete with the right to suspend and purge opposition, or it may be limited to the right to decide and implement policy. But insofar as leaders are able not only to suggest courses of action but to determine them, they have power over the membership. If their offices are protected from immediate and effective control by the membership, they have an entrenched position of power and may be said to be bureaucrats.

Is it realistic to argue that labour leaders exercise power? Compared to politicians or bosses, the labour bureaucrat is a weak creature. The union official exercises power only over a fragment of a worker's life, and may only call upon union members to do a small range of things. The labour leader has no great fortune or police force to enforce compliance, and the sanctions available to apply to those who disobey are strictly limited. Furthermore, most union leaders are elected under rules more democratic than those used in government elections, and of course, no corporate enterprise even pretends to be democratic. When we speak of the power of the labour leader, then, we do well to remember that it is a weak thing compared to that of capital and the state. Nevertheless the labour leader

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has always had more than the simple ability to act or the right to act on the instruction of another; the bureaucrat has had some power over others. We may define power as the ability to make decisions that are binding on another, the ability to implement decisions and policy that affect others without their express consent, or the ability to compel others, by coercion or persuasion, to do that which they may not have done otherwise. In this sense, the labour bureaucrat may be said to have power over others, though it may be a limited and relatively weak power.

The sources of the labour leader's power usually differ from those of the politician or boss. Most often it does not stem from the barrel of a gun, though on occasion it has. Nor does it result from the ownership of property and control of wealth. Typically it comes from two closely connected sources, authority and the control of information. Authority may be defined as the followers' recognition of the right of the leader to command or issue instructions that are to be obeyed. This authority, the so-called right to rule, may itself come from a number of sources. It may be granted freely and actively by the membership at large who have come together democratically to limit their individual freedom in order to protect the freedom of the collectivity. But such a stewardship of rights and freedoms is rarely granted consciously and freely in a benevolent "social contract". Often workers join unions because doing so is a condition of employment, and the union leader's authority is seen to rest on coercion and collaboration with the employer. Members may be faced with a *fait accompli*, in that union structures and officials are in place with entrenched powers before they join the union. The union leadership may be seen as having a relative autonomy from the membership, or may be viewed as a clique that represents a faction in a union. The leader's authority may be based on tradition and habit; it may be a recognition of past service and sacrifice; it may be the result of personal charisma, if someone appears to embody the spirit, will, and dreams of the membership. Authority may result from apathy if workers believe the leaders are handling affairs in such a way that it is not worth the trouble to try to replace them; it may be based on procedures and positions enshrined in a constitution created by unionists long dead. Authority may also be derived from expertise, for workers may decide to give power to those believed best qualified to handle union affairs. Regardless of the ways in which it is obtained, it is authority – the recognition of their right to rule – that supplies part of the power of the labour bureaucrats.

We may ask if this authority, however granted or grasped, is in fact legitimate. Max Weber held that authority was legitimate by definition, for people would obey only those whose right to rule they recognized and would not obey those whom they believed did not have such a right. The test for such recognition was coercion: if it had to be used to enforce decisions then clearly people did not recognize the authority of the ruler.

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Weber's definition bolsters Zeitlin's argument, for it implies that people consent to be ruled. It also implies that some benefit is derived from surrendering one's autonomy to the leader, and that this benefit confers some legitimacy. If there is some truth in these claims, they obscure more vital considerations. First, we may dispense with the notion that derived benefits in fact represent either consent or legitimacy. Slaves may be said to derive some benefit from being slaves: they are supplied with food, shelter, and clothing, and are freed from the burden of having to secure these items. No one, however, would claim that this legitimizes the power of the slave owner. Similarly, the receipt of social benefits, a wage, or a collective agreement does not legitimize the power of the state, capital, or the union leader. Nor does it imply consent, for in none of these situations does the individual enter the relationship as an equal with other realistic options.

Next, we may ask how much and what kind of dissent are required before authority is declared illegitimate? Do the actions of a minority opposing the leadership serve to remove its right to rule? A simple majority? An overwhelming majority? What sorts of opposition count as registering a lack of consent? Petitions? Absenteeism? Motions from the floor? Storming of the union office? We may also want to consider what coercion consists of. Must it always be physical force? Surely any unpleasant consequences, or the threat of such consequences, ranging from abuse or ridicule at a union meeting to expulsion from the union, may be considered coercion. Similarly, how are we to decide what counts as consent? The mere absence of revolt is not precise enough, for it is well-nigh impossible to determine if the lack of opposition is the result of coercion or not. The lack of revolt or dissent may in fact be acquiescence to power, not the acknowledgment of a right to rule. Not all of us are able to be an Emma Goldman or a Joe Hill, always ready to hurl defiance at our oppressors. But a lack of bravery, a sense of discretion, a pragmatic weighing of costs and benefits, or a sense of futility, are not the same as consent. Whenever there exist any unpleasant consequences, or the threat of such consequences, whether these be overt or implied, material or psychological, it is impossible to distinguish between consent and coercion. Union leaders customarily have had some formal means of coercion at their disposal, ranging from banning from meetings to fines and purging from the union. They also have informal means, such as refined debating techniques that may embarrass the rank-and-file member, or the ability to determine which grievances and demands will be acted upon by the union. Indeed, such forms of coercion are often deemed necessary, in order to enforce the discipline that is believed to be a vital part of collective action. Often the labour leader may be able to dispense favours and rewards, such as personal service, praise, expedited handling of a grievance, even a staff job. These rewards are simply the other side of the coin of coercion, and are part of the bureaucrat's power. Insofar as union

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leaders have any means to coerce members, it is impossible to determine where consent begins and ends. Thus we must stand Weber on his head and argue that all authority is illegitimate. Such a conclusion was reached by Michael Bakunin, when he wrote,

> We accept all natural authorities and all influences of fact, but none of *right*; for every authority or every influence of right, officially imposed as such, becoming directly an oppression and a falsehood, would inevitably impose upon us [. . .] slavery and absurdity.
>
> In a word, we reject all legislation, all authority, and all privileged, licensed, official, and legal influence, even though arising from universal suffrage, convinced that it can turn only to the advantage of a dominant minority of exploiters against the immense majority in subjection to them [. . .].
>
> The principle of authority [. . .] becomes a monstrosity, a flagrant denial of humanity, a source of slavery and intellectual and moral depravity [. . .]. The only grand and omnipotent authority, at once natural and rational, the only one which we may respect, will be that of the collective and public spirit of a society founded on equality and solidarity and the mutual human respect of all its members.[13]

We must also consider how consent, or what passes for it, is achieved. Consent may be manipulated in any number of ways. Leaders may say one thing and then do another. Appeals to cherished, abstract ideals may be persuasive, and yet not accurately reflect the real policies and aims of the union bureaucrat. It is not possible for all people to investigate all the claims of those in office, and often union affairs play a secondary role in people's lives. In order to question and dissent, people must have the tools of reason, security, time, and information, and all of these may be disrupted by those in power. In particular, the bureaucrat often controls information and knowledge, and this control both props up authority and confers power in itself. Again, Bakunin's work, more sensitive to the question of power than that of Marx, is useful. He warns explicitly that knowledge forms a kind of capital that can be used to exploit others:

> Is it not evident that out of two persons endowed with a nearly equal natural intelligence, the one who knows more, whose mind has been broadened to a greater extent by science and who, having a better understanding of the interlinking system of natural and social facts [. . .] will grasp more readily and in a broader light the character of the environment in which he finds himself? And is it not evident also that that person will feel more free, and that in practice he will prove the cleverer and stronger of the two? It stands to reason that the one who knows more will dominate the one who knows less, and if there were, to begin with, only this difference in upbringing and education between two classes, it

[13] Michael Bakunin, *God and the State* (New York, 1970), pp. 35, 41–42.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020859000110703 Published online by Cambridge University Press

> would in itself produce in a comparatively short time all the other differences and human society would relapse into its present state; that is, it would split up again into a mass of slaves and a small number of masters, the first working for the latter as they do now in existing society.[14]

The kinds of knowledge and information used by labour officials to do their jobs vary considerably, but they represent a source of power that is not generally and easily available to the rest of the membership. Even the shop stewards are privy to a wide variety of information. By virtue of their knowledge and their willingness to take on a job that requires some dedication and work, stewards, in some sense, are removed from the culture of their co-workers. If all workers are equal, shop stewards are a little more equal. They make decisions, and they interpret and administer the decisions of others. Workers go to the shop stewards to ask for advice and representation. If there is a problem on the shop floor, employers and workers alike turn to the stewards. They are no longer ordinary workers speaking for themselves; now they must speak for the collectivity. This imposes on them an outlook different from that of the rank and file. They must consider not only the good of the individual or the shop, but also the good of the union as a whole. They must examine the long-term consequences of the actions of the local membership, and must try to balance the demands from the shop floor with the strictures of the contract, the strength of the employer, and the strategy of the rest of the union. Stewards are required to think critically, to judge ideas, facts, complaints, opinions, and the like with criteria different from that of the members who put them forward. They must assume a kind of "objectivity", that is, they must remove themselves from the individual, subjective, relatively short-sighted point of view of the rank and file member and consider a host of other factors when they decide when, if, and how to proceed with a grievance. The information and culture of the stewards, who are caught between the demands of the membership and those of the union hierarchy, may be valuable, even necessary, if they are to be effective. But the price is the relative isolation or separation of the stewards from the rank and file.

Thus the shop steward may accurately be portrayed as part of the union bureaucracy. Their interests and concerns may be very different from those of higher union officials, but they are also somewhat different from those of the workers they are chosen to represent. If this is true of this first level of the labour bureaucracy, how much truer it is of the other levels that are almost completely removed from the day to day contact with the workplace.

[14] G. P. Maximoff, *The Political Philosophy of Bakunin: Scientific Anarchism* (New York, 1964), p. 328.

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Hyman, therefore, like Michels before him, is quite correct to assert that bureaucracy is a "relationship which permeates the whole practice of trade unionism". It has always been a tendency in the labour movement, sometimes the result of pure self-interest, but more often the result of what seemed at the time to be good, practical, legitimate concerns. When the state uses lawyers to draft labour laws it would be negligent for unions not to hire and train their own experts to cope. Obviously, it is good for shop stewards to know more, not less, about a wide variety of matters. When under attack, or pressing home an advantage, it is useful to have experienced, practical, and tested leaders at the helm. If members, or potential members, are apathetic or cowed, the union's survival may depend on a cadre of class conscious, highly motivated officials who have been removed from the day-to-day shop-floor struggle and can devote their time, energy, and knowledge to the cause. But it must always be kept in mind that in creating a split between members and leaders a bureaucratic elite is formed. Whenever bureaucracy is not recognized as a possible danger and is not attacked by an active, conscious, and alert opposition, it is likely to flourish. As Bakunin suggested, "the absence of opposition and control and of continuous vigilance inevitably becomes a source of depravity for all individuals vested with social power".[15] Insofar as this is not recognized and acted upon by the rank and file, unions become more bureaucratized over time. Leaders tend to hold on to their positions, and policy that encourages hierarchy and rule by experts becomes the norm. To understand the labour bureaucracy we must look for those things that tended to separate union leaders from the rank and file. We may examine privileges granted by the union, such as dues refunds, salaries, offices, and the like. We may look for the development of expertise and calls for officials to be selected on the basis of such expertise. The control of information, elevated status, authority over members, control of union policy and structures, all the things that tend to separate union officers from the shop floor and the workers they represent, offer clues to the development of union bureaucracy. Other pressures encourage such a state of mind. The bureaucrat is empowered to speak and decide for others, and thus is encouraged to rely upon personal experience and wisdom, and to have faith in them. At the same time, the nature of contract negotiations, grievances, and other parts of the bureaucrat's duties is an exercise in the art of the possible. At the bottom of the tasks assigned to the leader is the need for resolution and agreement. The procedures and outcomes of negotiating tend to encourage conciliatory behaviour: at the end of the day, the contract must be signed, the grievance resolved. Even the most radical and militant union, in the absence of a revolutionary situation, must eventually come to terms. These three factors

[15] Dolgoff, p. 245.

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– an ability to generalize from one's own position, a belief in one's ability to decide for others, and the need for resolution, are sufficient in themselves to convince most labour bureaucrats that they understand the "real" requirements of those they represent. Furthermore, if members, for any reason, do not take an active part in the union, the survival of leaders may depend on a strategy of least alienation, that is, a strategy that will provoke the fewest number of union members. This means that the union leader should not get too far ahead of or behind the rank and file in policy and actions. Often the best strategy for leaders who wish to stay in power is to pursue a moderate course, for this will result in the smallest number challenging their authority. It will also mean that in peaks of militancy and radicalism their positions will be in jeopardy, but over the long term the leader who best avoids alienating a sizeable bloc will tend to stay in power the longest. In this sense, the reformism and moderation of union leaders may be said to stem from the rank and file, rather than be imposed upon them. Since challenges from the right wing will be helped by bosses and the state, leaders may fear threats from the left less. If the rank and file cannot be assumed to have a single, fixed ideological position, let alone an unwavering left position, the leadership must always look to the right to avoid an effective challenge. Left critiques will not be supported by capital, and therefore tend to pose less of a menace. It should come as no surprise that right-wing insurgents in a union usually find themselves out-flanked by the leadership while left-wingers find themselves attacked head-on. There is something of an incentive for labour bureaucrats to move to the right, and again, this in part stems from the rank and file.

Bureaucracy is not a question of this or that tactical manoeuvre, this or that position. It is a fundamental belief in the inability of the masses to rule themselves. In the more subtle sense of perpetuating this belief, the bureaucracy may be said to perform its function of incorporation into private and state capitalism.

The reformism of the union bureaucracy lies precisely in its efforts to convince the working class, by example, ideology, and repression, that some such form of leadership is inevitable and in the best interests of the working class. Therefore, while the leadership may oppose specific abuses and turns of capitalism, and may or may not represent the articulated wishes of the rank and file, it is by its very nature committed to the rule by an elite in labour, industry, and society.

What does remain constant for labour bureaucrats is the desire to promote and protect their own self-interest. For it is this position as leader that separates them from the rank and file, not any particular left or right ideology. As leaders the labour bureaucrats have interests that are significantly different from those of the membership, for they wish to maintain their positions. The saga of Cincinnatus is as rare in the history of bureau-

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020859000110703 Published online by Cambridge University Press

cracy as it is in the history of Rome. What we should expect from labour bureaucrats then is not a consistent platform of incorporation or radicalism, for this will change according to how they perceive their interests. What may be found is a consistent ideology that presents the particular interests of this group as the universal interests of the working class. It becomes necessary to study the bureaucrats as a distinct layer of the working class, and to examine their culture, specific class location, and world view. Since they have individual interests as well as group interests, it is useful to study their social mobility. One theory that follows from this picture of the labour bureaucrats is that they will be more able and willing to move out of the working class than other workers. They may be more reluctant to return to the tools, and we may expect them to try to move into other kinds of jobs, such as politician, government official, editor, and the like. They may even be likely to become bosses themselves.

To study bureaucracy, we must study the bureaucrats. The fundamental assumption of this argument is that bureaucrats have interests and identifications that are distinct from those of the working class as a whole, whether the workers care much about them or not. As an elite, the bureaucracy tends to work to protect its privileges and to secure them at the expense of competitors. Though specific formal ideologies will differ, one point will remain the same: the bureaucrats will not advocate and work towards participatory democracy in the union; that is, they will not actively work for their own removal. For the historian, the bureaucracy becomes an identifiable group that may be analysed and understood. These questions in particular should be asked: In what ways do bureaucrats differ from and resemble the rank and file? Are there any characteristics that tend to increase one's likelihood of becoming and staying a trade-union official? How do leaders justify their roles and privileges? How does being a labour bureaucrat take a worker from the working class? Does a career as a labour leader enable one to pole-vault out of the working class? How are political ideologies reconciled with the concerns of bureaucrats? What is the relationship between their class position and background and ideology?

In this sense, the concept of the labour bureaucracy is still useful as a way to explain the ideologies of the labour movement. Far from eliminating it from historiography, we need to take it as a given and move on to explore its development and impact.

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