A NEW LABOR MOVEMENT FOR THE NEW CENTURY

EDITED BY GREGORY MANTSIOS
AFTERWORD BY JOHN J. SWEENEY

MONTHLY REVIEW PRESS
NEW YORK

Copyright © 1998 by Gregory Mantsios
All rights reserved

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

A new labor movement for the new century : a collection of essays from the Labor Resource Center, Queens College, City University of New York / edited by Gregory Mantsios : foreword by Dan Georgakas :
p. cm.
Also published by: New York : Garland Pub., © 1998.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 0-85345-937-1
1. Labor movement—United States. 2. Labor policy—United States. 3. Trade-unions—United States. 4. Trade-unions—United States—Political activity. I. Mantsios, Gregory. II. Queens College (New York, N.Y.). Labor Resource Center.
HD8072.5.N484 1998b
331.88'0973—dc21 98-17905
CIP

All royalties from this anthology will be used to support student scholarships. These scholarships will be made available to students enrolled in the Queens College Bachelor of Applied Social Science Program—a special degree program designed to prepare students for advocacy work with unions, community organizations, and government.

Monthly Review Press
122 West 27th Street
New York, NY 10001

Manufactured in the United States of America
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Creating Democratic Communities in the Workplace

Elaine Bernard

The most important challenge for labor and society in the twenty-first century is the question of democracy. Can we build and sustain democratic communities where we live, in the workplace, throughout the country, and globally? The New Right, in the U.S. and internationally, fully understands what is at stake in this battle for democratic control—and they are out to destroy democracy. For the most part, the New Right is not so crass as to come right out and say they are against democracy. Rather, they go about thwarting and rolling back popular control by stealth. Everywhere, they seek to replace democratic institutions with market mechanisms. They are attempting to construct a new political consensus which designates virtually all problems as the responsibility of the individual, whose fate is left to the mercy of market forces. This program of the Right seeks nothing less than the destruction of civil society and community, without which there can be no democracy.

THE MARKET VIEW

How does democracy differ from market relations? In a democracy, the practice is "one person, one vote." The humblest and most distinguished citizens are equal, with each having only one vote. But in the marketplace, it

is "one dollar, one vote," which, despite an appearance of neutrality and equality, is an inherently unjust equation that privileges the rich at the expense of the poor. In such statements as "Let the market decide," promoted as principle by the New Right, the market disguises human agency and action and gives the appearance of a natural process, while serving the demands of the wealthy whose dollars have the power to shape the rules of the market.

The elevation of markets as the sole arbiter of value also destroys people's sense of belonging to a community. People feel isolated and powerless, which in turn leads to demoralization. If each of us is on our own, none of us can change very much individually, so we are forced to accept things as they are. No single individual can answer any of the big questions in our society. An individual cannot opt for single-payer health care or rapid transit, or address the problem of declining wages and unemployment. So by default these "big" problems become "unsolvable."

Former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher summed up this anti-social, anti-community philosophy of the New Right succinctly when she proclaimed that there is no such thing as society; there are simply individuals and their families. This frightening world view forces people to seek individual solutions and pits people against one another, reducing social responsibility and cohesion. If there is no such thing as society and there are only markets, then government is a waste, and redistributive programs are robbery. With no society, anything that goes from my pocket into the community is a scam. Worse yet, anything that goes from my pocket makes it just that much harder for me and my family to survive. It is a zero-sum view of society where your gain is my loss, and an injury to one is their problem. And this is the view that will ultimately prevail if the New Right succeeds in its attempt to eviscerate democratic institutions—from government to communities to unions.

WORKPLACE RIGHTS AND DEMOCRACY

It is important to place the issue of democracy in the labor movement within the wider context of the New Right's attempt to destroy democracy and inclusive democratic communities throughout society. After all, what is it that unions do? First and foremost, unions are about creating community. Yes, unions improve workers' wages, benefits, and working conditions, and that is an important struggle in the face of growing income inequality. But unions have always done more than simply organize for improved wages

labor's position. A case in point of an issue which badly needs to be discussed openly is the AFL-CIO's position on political action. The vast majority of unionists in the U.S. believe that the AFL-CIO's political position is to support the Democrats. Yet, the actual position of the labor movement has for decades been non-partisan. In a tradition which spans back to the American Federation of Labor (AFL) founding president, Samuel Gompers, politically labor's stance is "to reward its friends and penalize its enemies." However, in practice, the labor movement has had a very different practice. There has, for many years, been a close and "special" relationship in practice with the Democratic Party and leading Democrats—in spite of the formal non-partisan position. Today, with organizations such as the Labor Party arguing that labor should reconsider its non-partisan position and become more actively engaged in political action, a debate on labor's political stance is clearly needed. Such a debate, regardless of outcome, could assist in educating members on why politics is important for labor and why labor needs to be involved in electoral politics.

It is widely understood that information and access to information facilitates participation in decision-making. That is why openness is a hallmark of democratic organizations. What decisions are taken by an organization and how they are made should be visible to all members. Interested members should be encouraged to sit in on executive meetings, or committees or conferences. There are, of course, some times when a union cannot be completely open about all issues, such as bargaining or strike tactics. But for the most part, the vast majority of things that unions do at all levels of the organization, could and should be open to any interested member. Exclusion should be the exception, not the rule. Openness is also related to access to information. Often privileged access to information by certain members, and exclusion of others, is a method of perpetuating leadership and preventing serious challenges on policy issues.

Another area where openness and improved communications could assist in both strengthening the labor movement and making it more democratic is building links among union activists across organizations. This and support of multiunion/community coalitions, such as Jobs with Justice, are activities to which revitalized central labor councils could certainly contribute. With few exceptions, activists rarely meet with their peers in other organizations.

Linked to both the concept of participation and accountability is the issue of turnover and change of leadership and inclusion. The excitement

generated by the 1995 AFL-CIO convention was at least partially related to the fact that there was the possibility (and as it turned out, the fact) of a change in leadership. Accountability in practice is closely related to turnover of leadership, or at least the reasonable possibility of a successful challenge to leadership. For accountability to work, leaders and members both need to feel that leaders can be removed by members, and that their positions can be successfully challenged. Procedures to assure leadership accountability are difficult in practice. Term limits, while assuring turnover, do nothing to assure accountability and, in fact, might even be counter-productive, resulting in a constantly changing elected leadership with a powerful, experienced, non-rotating permanent staff. Rather than methods of assured turnover, such as term limitations, procedures that assure open elections at conventions, that give all candidates access to delegates and, where appropriate, access to the membership to campaign for delegate election, are much better methods. Again, though, they can only work if there is a practice that recognizes the right to caucus, as challengers will need organization to mount a serious challenge, not simply the right to personally dissent.

CONCLUSION

This leads us back to the wider issue of democracy in society as a whole and the goals of a labor movement. What is the ultimate role of labor? Is it merely to lobby power and get a little more for its members? Or is it to transform power in society as a whole by extending democracy to the workplace and the economic sphere and to break up the authoritarian rule of concentrations of power, influence and wealth? If labor's goal is the transformation of power, then it means leading a democratic struggle throughout society. It also means moving beyond a strategy of simply seeking to lobby those in power, whether by militant or cooperative strategies, and instead, building a democratic alternative to the concentration of power and wealth. It means placing democracy at the forefront of labor's agenda and building a labor movement which is larger than the ranks of the current union membership. A movement which can speak for the majority because it is the majority. Majorities are not found. One does not simply go out and look for one; rather, like all social constructions, they are built. It means getting involved in ongoing and disciplined coalitions with labor's allies, other progressive social movements, and constructing an alternative democratic agenda for power.

Seeing unions in this political context is vital to organized labor's success and survival. But understanding how politics is changing and the challenge of the New Right is important in appreciating the ongoing attack on unions and the rights of working people. With 14 million members, the labor movement remains the largest multiracial, multi-issue membership organization in the country. As such, it is a prime target of the political New Right which is attempting to further reduce working people's rights, in and out of the workplace and substitute markets for democratic decision-making. The New Right's program of privatization, deregulation, and free trade is aimed at destroying what democratic control we do have as a community over the economy. To meet the challenge of the New Right and its attempt to destroy democracy and inclusive democratic communities throughout society, labor needs to take the offensive. Labor needs to become the champion of democracy and civil society. The New Right is attempting to undermine all democratic institutions by turning everything into an individual responsibility. We need to respond by creating democratic communities, in the workplace and beyond. But for this to happen, unions themselves must become models of democratic practice.