

# Readers write in on the issue of workers' democracy

29 July 1999

Dear WSWS:

I would like to state my agreement with the article written by Mr. Jerry White dealing with the question of democracy in the unions. I have been a New York transit worker for more than seventeen years, and have accumulated a certain degree of experience on this issue. There is no doubt that the unions have become increasingly bureaucratic over the last decades. The question is why. I think that the strength of Mr. White's article lies in the fact that it provides an explanation for the degeneration of the unions.

Historically, unions have developed within the framework of the national economy, and the development of the nation-state. Today's economy is profoundly global, in the sense that production takes place on a trans-national level. With the development of computer and telecommunication technology, corporations can and do produce a product that is the result of labor that is employed from all over the globe. This creates a new kind of international workforce that is intimately connected at the point of production.

The unions today, not only do not seek to unify workers who are globally connected, but through their policy of nationalism and chauvinism, seek to divide workers. These divisions take many different forms. For example, the struggles of workers in the same city, but in different unions, are kept separated by different contract deadlines and other techniques. The struggles of unionized workers are kept separated from non-union workers and students. Even within the same union local, workers in different trades are kept divided. It is therefore not surprising that there is no room for genuine workers' democracy in these organizations.

As a result there is a deeply felt hostility from the rank and file to the union leadership. I find that it is very easy to communicate with my fellow transit workers about the crimes and betrayals of the union leadership, which are many. For example, there has not been a single contract that I can remember that did not contain serious givebacks, and which therefore I, as well as many others, opposed. The more difficult question to discuss with my coworkers is the question of why this is the case. Is it just the subjective problems of union bureaucrats, or is there a serious objective explanation for the degeneration of the unions? An overwhelming number of workers believe that the former is the case.

It is precisely this perception which makes it possible for a certain layer of "dissidents" in New York to rise to a prominent position within the Transport Workers Union Local 100, a union with over 32,000 members. A number of left radicals, who privately consider themselves socialists, but are opposed to raising socialist policies among workers, formed a faction in the union called New Directions. They have been in existence for over fifteen years, and they having steadily been building up electoral support. In the most recent election, which took place last year, they won 49.5 percent of the vote, the closest they have come in capturing control of the entire local. They have been able to do this by appealing to the justified hatred of the membership to the current leadership while at the same time providing no analysis of the decline of unionism. In other

words, they say what is popular, and avoid discussing the difficult, but most fundamental issues.

In terms of their program, New Directions consider themselves the biggest champions of union democracy. The current contract expires in mid-December, and in preparation for a new one, they call for greater participation from the local's executive board, (they control almost half the seats), and the rank and file. They ask that the union distribute copies of the contract before it is voted on by the membership. In the past, they have called for more shop steward involvement in the union's affairs. All of these demands have some appeal, but New Directions has never explained how more democracy alone will translate into better contracts or fundamentally change the role the trade unions have played.

In defending their outlook, New Directions has claimed that workers need the kind of leadership that former Teamsters President Ron Carey provided, and this will revive the labor movement. That is, they used to hail him until he was forced out of office for stealing union money for his reelection.

This is a faction without the kind of great ideas that can truly inspire and mobilize the rank and file. It is true that they get votes, and are in a position in the next two years to win the leadership of the local. Nevertheless, they do not represent an insurgent movement of workers. This is expressed in the fact that despite all their efforts, they cannot mobilize the membership to come to the union meetings in those divisions in which they have won the leading positions by the most overwhelming margins. Such meetings remain remarkably small.

This is because, despite all the rhetoric and name-calling that they engage in, the two factions within the union have a perspective that are essentially the same. They both appeal to the narrowest conceptions of trade unionism. They both advocate an outlook that tells transit workers to be concerned only with their own contract, and not with other workers internationally; or to examine the growing social and income inequality that is taking pace on a global scale, and therefore what workers should do about it.

In this regard, it is necessary to raise the issue of workfare in New York City. For years, hundreds of thousands of welfare recipients have been used as a cheap labor force replacing civil service and union employees. This has been made possible through an agreement that the unions themselves reached with Mayor Rudolph Giuliani. These union leaders then endorsed the Republican mayor in his successful 1997 reelection campaign. Many of these same labor leaders have since been forced out of office for stealing union money for personal gain, and for the rigging of the 1996 contract vote with the city that included a highly unpopular two-year pay freeze for municipal employees. Another union leader, a man with a reputation for being more militant, is currently under investigation also for stealing union funds.

TWU Local 100 reached a contractual agreement with the Transit Authority (TA) to allow welfare recipients to work as cleaners for their welfare checks. On June 2 about 200 of these workers began cleaning subway stations, and the TA hopes to have 2,000 working in the system

by the end of the year. It must be emphasized that these welfare workers are not only compelled to work for the equivalent of a minimum wage, but also have none of the usual rights that workers have to bargain for better conditions of employment. Indeed, by state law, they are not considered employees but welfare recipients who do not even have the right to join a union. Their situation can best be described as a new form of capitalist slavery approaching the conditions of the old Confederate south.

The best that can be said about the New Directions opposition to the introduction of workfare in transit is that they treat it as just one more issue to renegotiate in a new contract. In reality, just as historically, there was no way that free labor in the American North could compete with slavery in the South, so it is today that it is impossible for wage labor to compete with workfare. It took a civil war in the United States to resolve that issue, and today it will take a much more advanced kind of revolution for workers to put an end to the modern forms of slavery that are emerging globally.

New Directions does not raise these issues because it is a tendency that is founded on their acceptance of the right of the powers-that-be to exploit the laboring masses. They have a political outlook, which despite their pretensions, is identical to the labor leadership that they are challenging. While they roundly condemned the current local leadership for endorsing Mayor Giuliani, they never openly stated what their alternative was. By implication, they were endorsing the Democratic candidate for Mayor, Ruth Messinger, who had a program that was even more anti-labor than the incumbent.

These experiences in New York are just an example of what is happening to the unions in every part of the world. It demonstrates that genuine workers' democracy cannot be achieved within these moribund organizations. Working class democracy is crucial for the coming struggles, but can only be achieved through forms of organization which are based on the political independence of the international working class from all the parties of big business.

AC

19 July 1999

I am writing to express my agreement with the article written by Jerry White, "The political issues in the fight for workers' democracy."

I would like to emphasize the connection made between the lack of even the most elementary democratic rights for workers with the trade union bureaucracy's nationalist program and defense of the profit system.

For the past 13 years I have worked for Bell Atlantic and have been a member of the Communication Workers of America (CWA) Local 13000 in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. During this period the telecommunication industry has undergone profound changes, which has altered the relationship between the companies and the union and the members.

Prior to 1984 and the breakup of the old AT&T, the phone giant enjoyed what was the closest in the US to the state-controlled industries that existed in most European countries. AT&T was granted a monopoly over telecommunication and a pricing structure that ensured regular and handsome profits. During this period, the union could obtain a limited amount of concessions in exchange for labor peace, while the company could pass all wage increases onto consumers.

By the late 1970s and early 1980s developments in computer technology and telecommunications allowed a number of companies to challenge AT&T's monopoly, at first through the resale of long distance service and later with the development of their own networks. In 1983, in response to a lawsuit brought by AT&T rivals, a federal judge ordered the breakup of the telephone monopoly.

AT&T welcomed the breakup which it saw as a weapon to use against the union. Rather than leading a struggle against the destruction of jobs and living standards, the union adopted AT&T's argument that massive layoffs and concessions were necessary in order to allow the company to compete against its rivals. In 1984 there were 300,000 CWA members

working for AT&T, today there are little more than 50,000.

The same process, although at a somewhat slower pace, occurred at all the regional Bell companies, such as Bell Atlantic and the former Pacific Telesis. Since 1984, 100,000 jobs have been destroyed and the union has given up massive concessions in health and pension benefits, work rules and other rights in the name of helping the regional Bell companies remain competitive.

At the same time, the continual advancement in telecommunications and computer technology that has played an important role in the development of transnational production has had a vast impact upon the telecommunications industry itself. No longer can a company survive by having a local monopoly on phone service, rather each company has to align itself as a global provider of voice, data, video and wireless services. This was much of the motivation behind the passage of the 1996 Telecommunication Act that removed most of the remaining government regulations and control over the telecom industry.

For its part, the CWA bureaucracy has sought to secure its position by convincing the companies that it can act as a responsible partner in the fight against their global competitors. CWA President Morton Bahr took part in the presidential commission along with corporate executives, including Bell Atlantic CEO Ray Smith, that drew up the telecom act. At the same time the union contracted with the companies to set up subsidiaries in which workers are paid less than half the wages of workers doing the same jobs. In exchange for this service, the phone companies granted the CWA the right to represent these workers and collect union dues from them.

Having integrated themselves as junior partners with the phone companies, the CWA cannot allow any voice of opposition from the rank-and-file. For raising opposition to the policies of the CWA I have come under continuous harassment and threats. After being elected as a representative my branch was closed down and a new representative was appointed by the union. At union meetings I have been threatened and physically removed from the microphone for speaking out against concessions. Other threats and actions have been taken against me.

These methods are not reserved simply for socialist opponents of the union leadership like myself. No member is afforded basic democratic rights. Union meetings are held only once a year and when they occur they are held at inconvenient times and locations to ensure the lowest turnout. Members who do attend meetings are told that they can only ask questions and are not allowed to debate any CWA policy, let alone participate in the decision-making process. Grievances filed by members are put on hold for years only to be summarily dismissed at the signing of contract as an act of "good faith" by the union. During contract negotiations workers are not told what the union is asking for or what plans the union has, because, the union officials say, they want to "keep the company in the dark." In reality, the only ones kept in the dark are the members.

Most positions are decided by appointment or elections where there are no opponents. During the last election a group of former union officials who lost their posts due to the downsizing of AT&T challenged the local leadership. When the local leaders lost they declared the elections invalid and held a second one, which they lost again. Again they declared the elections invalid and held a third. With each election fewer and fewer members voted until the local leaders obtained the results they wanted.

The connection between the pro-company policies of the union and the lack of democracy for the workers can also be seen in the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA). Last year a group of miners in western Pennsylvania opposed the policies of the UMWA leadership, particularly the concessions granted by the UMWA to the coal operators and to the lack of democracy within the union. They raised many of the same issues being raised by the bus drivers in Seattle.

When they attempted to inform other miners of their positions by

passing out a leaflet at a union rally they were brutally attacked and beaten by a group of union thugs using wooden two-by-fours. After the attack the UMWA organized a commission to investigate the incident, which instead of punishing the thugs, threatened to expel the dissident miners. In the year since the attack the union collaborated with the company to lay off many of the workers who took part in the protest.

These examples, I hope, help show the conclusions drawn by White that the lack of democracy for workers within the unions is not limited to the corruption of this or that bureaucrat but rather is connected with the role of unions as defenders of the capitalist profit system. Democracy for workers can only be achieved inside organizations that fight based on a program that genuinely defends in the interests of the working class.

Yours truly,

PS

26 July 1999



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