

Let's Accept an Invitation from the Trumka of 1970—to Revolt

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When Herman Benson writes about the labor movement, I read with interest what he has to say, knowing that his last 50 years as head of the Association for Union Democracy (AUD) represent only the most *recent* part of an even longer career in the labor movement that began when he was a machinist in the auto industry and a member of the United Auto Workers after World War II. Later he became a labor journalist, the trade union editor of the Workers Party newspaper Labor Action, an activist in the Socialist Party, and an active member of the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU). Throughout his long and distinguished career he has put at the center of his concerns the rights of workers and workers' power in the workplace, in the union, and in society. Over the years he joined with rank-and-file workers in a wide variety of labor unions to help them clean up unions controlled by mobsters, by corrupt officials, or by bureaucrats who denied them their rights.

At the heart of brother Benson's political convictions is the view that when workers have the chance to think about, discuss, and debate not only their immediate union issues, but the larger issues of society and politics, they will make intelligent decisions. Knowing that he and I both believe that debate stands at the heart of a healthy labor movement, I am going to take issue with his recent article "Getting ready for the future: Replying to an invitation from Rich Trumka," believing that his article puts forward two contradictory positions, only one of which can be right.

Herman Benson opens his article praising the AFL-CIO leadership, writing that under President Richard Trumka's leadership "the AFL-CIO is moving firmly in the right direction—its stand on immigrant workers, on taxes, its increased alliance with community activists, its support for the nation's 99%, its call for social justice." He praises Trumka for recognizing "that the AFL-CIO must convince a wider audience that the labor movement represents its interests." Believing that Trumka is on the right track, Benson wants to help, writing: "To advance labor's cause, union members need not rise up, or revolt!, or struggle, or come out of the shops into the streets and confront capital. All that they need do in the context of our times is to become forthright advocates of the union cause, to speak out to their neighbors, their friends, their relatives, on the job, in the lunchrooms, in the churches. And it is a simple message: 'We are familiar with unions; they stand for people like us.'" In essence, Benson argues that all we need to do is support the existing labor bureaucracy as it attempts—without much struggle—to advance the labor movement through better public relations and liberal positions on social issues.

Yet, on the other hand, because he has such long experience in labor and because he is a realist and a radical, Benson recognizes that given the nature of the bureaucracy, we aren't going anywhere at the moment. Union members, he writes, are "disenchanted" because unions are so fundamentally bureaucratic and undemocratic. As he explains so clearly and powerfully:

"The obstacle is the divided soul of American labor leadership. In most of the issues that come up for decision in the broad public arena, they can be counted on to stand for progress, for social justice, for democracy **in the nation**. But it all changes **in the union**. In their unions, the main leaning of union officials is toward limitation, even repression, of democratic rights. Their instinctive bulldog grip on union power blunts their ability to serve effectively as progressive leaders in the nation."

In fact, he writes, when things go to the courts, the unions are for the suppression of members' rights. What Benson neglects to explain here is the reason for that, namely, that holding good positions on social justice issues ostensibly to be fought for by the Democratic Party (though actually often not) requires little from the unions, while democracy in the unions would force the unions to have to fight the employers and the government. *And they do not want a fight.* He concludes the section noting, "The AFL-CIO dilemma is personified in the figure of its top leader, President Rich Trumka." We see here the divided soul of Herman Benson who wants to support the unions as they are, but knows that we need a completely different labor movement if we are to have real unions.

Benson points out that when Trumka was a young man, he was a leader of the Miners for Democracy, a rank-and-file opposition group in the United Mine Workers that eventually wrested power from the gangster Tony Boyle, but that the union seldom mentions this history, in fact suppresses this history. Why? Because, "The unwritten code, accepted almost universally by the top labor leadership, holds that there is something, suspect, heretical, morally impermissible when a rank and file organizes against its leadership." Yet the truth is that it is only when rank-and-file workers organize against their union leaders and either force them to fight—not likely—or drive them out of office and put fighters in the leadership—possible but difficult—that things really change. Such is the story of the recent struggle by the Chicago Teachers Union where a rank-and-file group, with socialists from various traditions in the leadership, won the confidence of the members, took office, and carried out the most important strike since the UPS Strike in 1997.

The strategy needed for American unions is not that of collaborating with Trumka and the AFL-CIO or any of the International Unions and their officers, but rather of organizing rank-and-file workers around the issues they confront in the workplace and in their unions. The unions today are simply hopelessly ensnared in labor law and court decisions, embarrassingly involved in their partnership with the employers, slavishly dependent upon the Democratic Party, the result of a 70-year degeneration of the labor movement. They will not be changed without a fight that will have to transform their pro-capitalist ideology, restructure their bureaucratic organizations, and once again inspire militant class struggle unionism.

To carry out that fight they will have to build a movement prepared to engage in job actions and wildcat strikes that violate the contract, meaning that they risk their jobs and court action that will penalize their unions economically, and they will have to engage in civil disobedience and be prepared to go to jail. Where is the model for such a movement? Lee Sustar, one of the country's best labor journalists and analysts lays out these ideas in greater detail in a fine article in the *International Socialist Review*. The model for what we need today can still be found in the Miners for Democracy that Trumka led in the 1970s and in the Chicago Teachers Union today. We need to accept an invitation from Trumka, but not the Trumka who today heads the AFL-CIO, but from the young Trumka who invited us once long ago to rise up, to struggle, and to revolt! If workers do revolt they may find themselves seeking the assistance of Herman Benson and the Association of Union Democracy which has helped so many rebels in the past.

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