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Labor Studies Journal 2010 35: 322 originally published online 9 June 2009

DOI: 10.1177/0160449X09337901

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“Why Should the Business Agents Be Bigger Than the Organization?”

A Study of Failed Rebellion in New York City’s Painters’ Union, 1947 to 1973

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Union democracy has tended to result in prolabor contracts in the American labor movement. However, many rank-and-file movements attempting to transform staff-led unions into democratic ones have experienced failure. The author examines some of the reasons why insurgent democracy movements are often unable to institute lasting democratic structures and militant reforms in the building trades, through an in-depth analysis of a failed rebellion in New York City’s painters’ union from 1947 to 1973. In contrast to recent literature that explains success and failure by emphasizing the traits of the general membership and the tactics of insurgent reformers, the author argues that fuller attention should be given to the union characteristics that generate staff power. In particular, the author shows that job allocation through the hiring hall is one means by which a corrupt staff can discipline an insurgent membership. The author also shows that when these conditions are undermined through contestation, staff-employer collusion can continue to make discipline through job allocation possible.

Keywords: *union democracy; staff-led unionism; rank-and-file movements; building trades*

Rank-and-File Rebellions

Rank-and-file movements attempting to transform undemocratic staff-led unions are common in the annals of American labor history. Through running reform candidates in union elections or engaging in more contentions means, such as wildcat strikes, these movements often sought to challenge union leaders and employers and

Author’s Note: I would like to thank Charles Post, René Rojas, Michael Schwartz, Jason Stanley, and all of the participants of the Power, Politics, and Protest workshop at New York University for their very helpful comments. I also thank Vivek Chibber, Jeff Goodwin, Daisy Rooks, and the reviewers at *Labor Studies Journal* for their insightful comments and critiques on earlier drafts of the article. Of course, any errors are my own. This article is dedicated to the painters of DC 9 that struggled for democratic unionism.

shift control to the rank and file. However, time after time, initiatives failed to fully realize their goals (Moody 1988).

In the mid-1960s, rank-and-file members of District Council No. 9 (DC 9), the painters' and paperhangers' union in New York City, challenged their corrupt union staff, demanding both democratic change and a firmer stance against management. But despite initial gains, by 1973, the movement was largely destroyed. Using the particular history of DC 9, I answer a basic question: in a context of contestation and change, what union characteristics shape the possibilities of reform in staff-led unions? Specifically, how does the dominant staff discipline or circumvent democracy initiatives? I find that the key union characteristic that undermines the possibility for democratic change is staff control of job allocation. There are two mechanisms that explain staff control over the distribution of work to members: a corrupted hiring hall and staff collusion with employers.

Union democracy in the labor movement and in labor studies has been both highly scrutinized and highly contentious (Sharpe 2004). But it is often unclearly defined. Following recent research (Stepan-Norris and Zeitlin 2003), the definition I use is consistent with critical democratic theory (Neumann 1957; Pateman 1970). Under democratic conditions, "aims, methods, and uses of political power are decided through juridically protected, freely self-determined political activity" (Stepan-Norris and Zeitlin 2003:58). Thus, a democratic union should have a constitution that provides union members with institutional protections and prerogatives for self-governance, an active membership that participates in decision making, and the space for unfettered institutionalized opposition against staff and policies (Stepan-Norris and Zeitlin 2003:59).

Yet not everyone finds the achievement of union democracy a pressing goal for the labor movement in a period when labor has suffered such serious setbacks. For instance, Stephen Lerner (2002) emphasized the importance of building union power and membership over democratic forms of internal governance, suggesting that the latter follows from the former, not vice versa. Recent scholarship demonstrates that democracy, however, *is* power, making a positive difference in both the material well-being of rank-and-file workers and their leverage vis-à-vis employers (Moody 2007:177). Parker and Gruelle (1999) effectively argued that staff-led unionism, a context in which the staff dominates the decision-making process, has a demobilizing effect on the general membership. Alternatively, an engaged and participatory membership will have more effective ideas for dealing with management, will increase the likelihood that the union be accountable to their interests and not the interests of the leadership if they differ, and will increase the capacity of the union to challenge management; that is, membership mobilization more easily follows from membership participation than membership inactivity (pp. 12-15). Stepan-Norris and Zeitlin (2003:164-69) confirmed these claims by demonstrating that highly democratic unions in CIO locals in California between 1938 and 1955 were systematically more likely to win prolabor contracts than their staff-led counterparts (see also Kimeldorf 1988). Many rank-and-file movements in the United States aim to bring about just these changes.

The painters' case is one of many such rank-and-file rebellions occurring between 1966 and 1975 (many more continued to emerge into the 1980s, but this period marks a concentration of labor militancy). Unions had prospered in the 1950s and early 1960s, with workers' income and political sway increasing relative to earlier years. However, an intensifying period of economic stagnation and social, political, and cultural upheaval in the mid-1960s, in combination with lower levels of unemployment, led to an increased willingness and need on the part of the rank and file to engage in dissidence and challenge employers (Isaac, McDonald, and Lukasik 2006; Isaac and Christiansen 2002; Moody 1988). For example, the use of strikes had fallen somewhat from the mid-1950s through the early 1960s. Between 1956 and 1965, there was an annual average of 3,619 strikes, involving an annual average of 1,536,000 strikers and an annual average of 2.7 percent of those employed. However, between 1966 and 1975, labor's militancy was reflected in its willingness to walk off the job in greater numbers. In these years, there was an annual average of 5,207 strikes, 2,503,000 strikers, and 3.5 percent of those employed (cited in Moody 2007:99).

Anecdotal evidence suggests that a significant number of these labor actions were driven not by the staff but by the rank and file themselves.¹ To name just a few examples, in 1968, black workers at Dodge Main plant in Detroit formed the Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement and engaged in wildcat strikes that challenged both racism in the company and the United Auto Workers as well as speed-up conditions on the shop floor (Geschwender 1977). In 1970, 200,000 postal employees joined picket lines in both the largest strike against the U.S. government and the largest wildcat strike in U.S. history (Brecher 1997; Brenner 1996). In 1972, General Motors workers struck an assembly plant in Lordstown, Ohio, to protest speed-ups, despite the leadership's insistence not to (Green 1998). Additionally, the rank-and-file caucus Miners for Democracy, which developed out of the East Gulf wildcat strike of 42,000 miners, directly challenged and defeated the United Mine Workers of America's corrupt leadership (Nyden 1974). And finally, in 1974, Steel Workers Fight Back was formed in the United Steel Workers of America to fight union corruption and staff dominance (Nyden 1985). But despite the many promising movements of the era, by the end of the 1970s, labor's militancy and gains in DC 9 and elsewhere were in sharp decline, leaving broad goals of union democracy and reform largely unattained (Brenner 1996). The question labor scholars and those committed to union democracy must ask ourselves is, What are the reasons why success was so limited for these movements?

Theorizing Barriers to Union Democracy

Scholars who study top-down or staff-dominated organizations often analyze the conditions for their formation (Lipset, Trow, and Coleman 1956; Lipset 1964; Merton 1957; Michels [1908] 1987, [1915] 1962; Rucht 1999; Schmidt 1973; Schwartz 1976; Schwartz, Rosenthal, and Schwartz 1981; Stepan-Norris 1997; Stepan-Norris and Zeitlin 1989, 1996, 2003). And many researchers agree that the development of staff dominance is at least a tendency (Lipset, Trow, and Coleman

1956; Lipset 1964; Merton 1957; Rucht 1999; Schmidt 1973; Schwartz 1976). However, much of this very research has shown that it is a surmountable one.² For instance, Lipset, Trow, and Coleman (1956) identified the specific features of a union that increase the likelihood of internal union democracy. Particularly, they emphasized the importance of autonomous intermediary subgroups within the organization that create centers of power whereby communication, ideas, training, and opportunities afford members the means for successful opposition against the leadership.

Stepan-Norris and Zeitlin (2003) demonstrated that the ideological orientation of factional subgroups further conditions the likelihood of democracy (see also Stepan-Norris 1997). They argued that a radical orientation of earlier union organizers provides long-term structural support for democratic governance by generating “experienced organizers” and a “lively democratic life” at the grassroots level (p. 102). On this basis, their analysis suggests that reform efforts are more easily repressed or prevented in unions that lack earlier “red unionism.” Since earlier red organizing generates factionalism along ideological lines, rather than through instrumental and personalistic allegiances, it tends to sustain democracy and counters business unionism. In the painters’ case, this was partially true. Earlier red unionism helped generate important factions and a union democracy movement, but failure had other causes.

Other researchers, however, have sought to demonstrate that union activists *themselves* can alter these structural conditions in their favor. For instance, Nyden (1974) argued, “In essence a successful movement is one which seeks to strengthen the social links between grassroots union members and union leaders as a way of resisting cooptive pressures in our political economy” (p. 34). Emphasizing the dynamics between employers, union leaders, and the rank and file, he suggested that employers and the rank and file are engaged in a “tug of war” over the union leadership, which is mediating between the two groups (see also Hyman and Fryer 1978).

Given this dynamic within capitalism, Nyden (1985:1184-85) put forward two conditions that increase the likelihood of the success of union reform movements. First, the movements themselves must be democratic. According to this perspective, democratic success requires that a movement create political communities that serve as intermediate links between insurgent caucus members and their leaders. In this sense, union reform movements are more likely to become permanent entities that bring about change if they develop organizational structures linking leaders to grassroots constituents (p. 1199). Importantly, Nyden emphasized that these links *can* be created by movements at the grassroots level (p. 1183). Second, he emphasized the importance of organizing around a consistent political platform, suggesting that those caucuses that organize around expediency and personalities are more vulnerable to forces of cooptation (p. 1192). Again, the painters’ movement fulfilled both of these conditions.

This scholarship focuses on the rank and file’s assumed capacity to overcome structural barriers. However, it does not identify the processes that generate the union leadership’s capacity to repress or circumvent these reform movements. In

many ways, the power of the leadership conditions, if not determines, the rank and file's ability to make change. Therefore, it is central to understand what constitutes that power. Early on, Michels ([1915] 1962) identified a number of leadership practices used to suppress democracy. And Foster (1927) applied them directly to unions.

At the national level, the international itself may step in to put a local or a district council under "trusteeship" or "supervision" as a means to undermine local dissidents, whether they are staff or rank-and-file members (Carney 2000; Geoghegan 1991:125). At the local or district council level, the officialdom may engage in violence—personally or hired—blacklist dissidents, engage in electoral fraud, disenfranchise the dissidents, and/or "red-bait" (Foster 1927:286-305). The union staff and employers may also make threats against the members of the union who support dissidents during elections (Feldman 2000). Finally, staff may maintain their position by controlling the information in the union. This entails limiting free press and self-promotion in the union paper and restricting the dissidents from distributing subversive materials to the membership (Foster 1927:364).

Central for this research, however, is that the capacity of the union staff to suppress dissidents is partially contingent on their relations with employers who have access to resources that may serve the staff's interests. The risk is that staff becomes much more than "a cop for the boss" (Glberman 2002) and instead becomes an actual partner. Thus, when the positions of officials are threatened, they may "turn to employers for assistance" (Foster 1927:278). Employers may oblige because they "seek to develop the trade union bureaucracy as a buffer . . . between them and the masses of workers, to break up and demoralize the latter's attacks" (Foster 1927:19).

Many labor scholars have highlighted this important relationship as a barrier to rank-and-file participation in union reform movements: mere membership apathy in these cases is not the main issue (Barbash 1970; Buhle 1999; Cohen 2006; Kirshbaum 1940; Licht and Barron 1978; Moody 1988, 2007; Peck 1963; Seidman 1938; Van Tine 1973). For instance, in his chronicle of Teamsters for a Democratic Union, La Botz (1990) quoted a rank-and-file reformer who explained his inability to develop a broader base of membership participation in the movement for democracy. The reformer noted, "I had a constant stream of phone calls from people that would like to help . . . but they would say, 'We just can't get involved' because their jobs were at stake . . . you mess with union leaders, and the companies mess with you" (p. 48). However, these insights have been anecdotal, and not subjected to systematic scrutiny.

In sum, the relevant literature on union democracy aspires to answer three distinct but related questions: What *traits of the general membership* lead to staff dominance or union democracy? What *rank-and-file tactics* are most effective in winning democracy? And what are the primary *staff- and employer-generated barriers* to rank-and-file movement success? In addition to identifying what factors emphasized in the literature had the greatest impact on the painters' reform movement, I seek to elaborate on the literature relevant to the third question.

Specifically, I ask what union characteristics explain the staff's capacity to discipline the rank and file. What factors will make it more or less likely that staff will have control over hiring? What is the role of the hiring hall? And finally, how does the nature of the staff-employer relationship affect democracy movements? This project is particularly sensitive to temporal changes in union characteristics during periods of contestation. Therefore, I also ask how these threats from staff and employers manifest themselves over the entire duration of contestation and what conditions within the union afford staff the power to enforce them.

Methodological Approach

In-depth historical analysis of DC 9 dating from 1947 to 1973 is used to answer the above questions. The archival data I used consists of leadership and dissident newspapers, flyers, court reports, personal correspondence, and personal writings. I also used seven in-depth interviews.³ This methodological approach is appropriate because the most prominent recent studies of union democracy have relied on quantitative analyses of union constitutions and by-laws (Stepan-Norris and Zeitlin 2003:55). While useful in many ways, this method may be somewhat limited. It is incapable of theorizing undemocratic practices that are constitutionally barred. In-depth case analysis allows a researcher to get into the sometimes hidden processes within the union. I chose DC 9 because the union constitution and district by-laws (sampled in five-year periods between 1955 and 1975) were moderately democratic (Vertical File IBPAT, folder 1; Schonfeld Papers, box 14; Stepan-Norris and Zeitlin 2003). However, undemocratic practices pervaded the district's functioning. While the constitution generated the capacity to engage in some of these practices, in the decisive instances, it was not the nature of the constitution that led to the failure of the democratic movement.

The study of a single historical case can generate more than the rejection of a hypothesis or the formation of initial hypotheses (Rueschemeyer 2003). Properly executed, the single-case method will test theoretical propositions and provide convincing causal explanations. As Rueschemeyer (2003) noted, "Skepticism about this claim rests ultimately on the mistaken identification of a single case with a single observation. Good historical analysis that is analytically oriented goes through frequent iterations of confronting explanatory propositions with many data points" (p. 318). Therefore, in a staff-dominated union, one can retest causal hypotheses at distinct moments in the process of rank-and-file contestation when changes are made and the organization is restructured.

I do this below by identifying the conditions within the union before and after the election of a dissident leader to the district council's main position. This allows me to assess theoretical claims during two distinct phases of the movement's life. In the first phase, 1947 to 1967, the movement was entirely grassroots, with no participants

in official union positions, and the presence of a hiring hall. In the second phase, 1967 to 1973, the movement's leader had won the union's most powerful single position, secretary-treasurer. The position afforded the movement a new set of resources to push through a set of successful reforms, including the removal of the hiring hall. The experience of the movement in both phases highlights two unique union characteristics that generate staff power: corrupted hiring hall functioning and collusive staff-employer relations.

Union Structure, Positions, and Hiring Dynamics in the Building Trades and DC 9

I analyze a movement for democracy that emerges within a district council in the building trades. In the hierarchy of union structures, the single international union sits on the top with many district councils beneath it organized by geographic region. Underneath these district councils are union locals often organized by region or neighborhood. DC 9 in New York City oversaw an average of twelve local unions throughout the period that I analyze, 1947 to 1973.

Five of the positions that fill or relate to these structures are of importance to the explanation for failure that I give: the rank and file, the secretary-treasurer, the business agent, the employer, and the shop steward. The rank and file is the membership of the union that does not occupy paid staff positions within the union itself. The secretary-treasurer is the chief position in the district council, overseeing the business of the union locals and general relations with local employers.

The business agents work at the level of the union local, where they run the local office and distribute employment to members when a hiring hall is operative. Like the secretary-treasurer, they are paid by the union as full-time staff and on average earn more than rank-and-file members. In relation to employers, the business agent's official role is to act as representatives of the rank and file by handling grievances, local negotiations, and disputes and checking for work site violations that might undermine the membership's interests.⁴ In this sense, business agents in DC 9 fulfill many of the prerogatives that shop stewards have in industrial unions.

Yet important differences remain between the positions of business agents and shop stewards. The business agents do not work alongside union members as painters; instead, they spend the workday at the local office or going from work site to work site. The shop steward, on the other hand, is an actual painter, chosen by his fellow workers to represent them on the job. Because of their close ties to the membership, in many unions, shop stewards are central to shop floor militancy and democracy (Hyman and Fryer 1978:168). However, the role of shop stewards in DC 9 was effectively subordinated to the role of the business agents over time. This was due both to their relationship with the business agents and to the nature of the building trades. First, in many locals in DC 9, shop stewards actually bought their positions

from business agents, with elections being bypassed altogether (Barish 1994). And further, the union leadership did not enforce a rule in the by-laws that made rotation of shop stewards mandatory (Article XI, section 4; Schonfeld Papers, box 14). Second, the building trades are very decentralized. Unlike steel, mining, auto, or other industrial settings, workers do not work at the same location every day with the same coworkers, or even for the same employer. Instead, irregular work with a different group of workers was not uncommon. In this setting, the ties that link the shop steward to the membership become loosened, with the business agent becoming the central link between the shop floor and the union. Because of these particular qualities, the business agents become the main representatives of the rank and file.

However, the business agents' positions generated a set of interests that led them to cooperate with employers, mostly industrial and commercial contractors, instead of challenging them on behalf of the union membership. They were under two pressures to do this. First, because of better pay and a generally easier job, business agents were intent on maintaining their position in the union. Elections every three years made this a challenge in the context of opposition. Therefore, business agents had an incentive to sanction dissidents, radical or otherwise, who were also vying for union power and to reward members who gave them support. Their ally in this struggle became the employer, who had a corresponding interest in maintaining a deradicalized union. The employer's resources, to varying degrees, were used by the business agents as means to suppress dissidence. This resulted in electoral victories for the one and a workforce that made minimal demands for the other. Second, actually aligning with employers resulted in material rewards for business agents above and beyond the formal benefits of the position. By overlooking violations and providing a quiescent workforce, the business agents were given money and favors from employers.

The business agents used the power of employers at the lowest level of the organization: the union locals. Through widespread collusion with employers in most of the union locals, the business agents were able to block attempts at democratization and/or militant reform coming from the membership, the secretary-treasurer, or both. However, the particular way in which they blocked militant reform was conditioned by the absence or presence of a hiring hall.

The hiring hall, a union administered job-referral system, became widespread in the building trades in the years immediately preceding and following the passage of the Labor-Management Reporting and Disclosure Act (LMRDA) of 1959 (Ross 1972:367). This is less true in other sectors of the economy that relied on regular employment at regular work sites. In the building trades, the hall increased the union's control over the labor supply and in turn strengthened the unions' bargaining position (p. 370). Kimeldorf (1988:29) suggested in his study of longshoremen that a union-run hiring hall that operated on a rotational basis insulated West Coast longshoremen from the employer discipline that East Coast longshoremen faced in the employer-run "shape-up" system. He argued that this form of union power created a space for union democracy in the West that was absent in the East.

However, in the case study below, I demonstrate that a hiring hall, while a potential source of union power, can also be a source of staff power over the membership. As Ross (1972) noted,

the imposition of formal procedures upon a wide variety of local practices has produced a situation where the formal hiring procedures exist next to a shadow system of job allocation which may or may not correspond to the written rules. (P. 378)

I also demonstrate that when this particular “shadow system” of staff power is absent, a new one emerges between staff and employers.

A Historical Overview of DC 9

In 1947, the Progressive Caucus lifted Martin Rarback out of relative obscurity when he won DC 9’s chief position of secretary-treasurer.⁵ He defeated the incumbent, Louis Weinstock, who was the leading figure in the Communist-led Rank-and-File Caucus. Rarback ascended the union hierarchy in a faction explicitly associated with the Socialist Workers Party, whose stated goals were to challenge corruption and autocracy. However, this reform approach quickly degenerated after 1951, when a small group of business agents, menaced by the possibility of losing their influence, ran an independent candidate against Rarback and threatened his position (Hall Papers, box 1, folder 3). Rarback barely beat the business agents’ candidate in the 1951 election with a slim plurality of 127 votes out of the 5,636 cast (Hall 1972). A rank-and-file supporter of Rarback voiced his concern in the administration-controlled paper, *The Progressive Painter*: “I’ve felt the union improved quite a bit with Marty, even with all the unemployment. [But] The Secretary should have more control over the business agents” (Winn Papers, box 7, folder 6). To secure his position in the union leadership, Rarback sided with the business agents, establishing an alliance that lasted almost two decades (Hall 1972).

Following Rarback’s realignment against reform, the leadership used two tactics to purge the members of the Progressive Caucus that remained intent on reforming the union. First, in 1952, Rarback and the business agents arranged to bring four autonomous locals into DC 9 for voting purposes only, ensuring his slate a percentage of votes every election. During his term in office, over a dozen autonomous locals were pulled in and out of the union via pro forma alliances just in time for elections (Hall 1972). Both measures served to neutralize reformist elements in the Progressive Caucus and secure leadership positions against electoral challenges.

Second, the leadership set up a hiring hall that furnished new recruits for employers bound by collective bargaining agreements. However, the hall increased the relative power that the staff had over the union’s general membership (Hall Papers, box 1, folder 3). After it was instituted, the hall put workers at the mercy of the business agents running it. Under the Rarback regime, it became a mechanism for blacklisting

dissident members and turned jobs into patronage gifts for those who came into favor with the administration. According to rank-and-file reformer, Frank Schonfeld, if a painter had good relations with Rarback and his local business agent, he would go from one job to the next, and if he did not, he would find himself getting less and less work; the painters would refer to this as getting “starved out” (Schonfeld 1994).

Given the constraints on rank-and-file dissidence that were generated through the union leadership’s control over the autonomous locals and job referrals, Rarback secured his position between 1953 and 1961 without electoral opposition. Business agents also shared in stable tenure. But despite their electoral stability, the interests of the membership were progressively overlooked, while staff corruption deepened (e.g., in 1964, Rarback bargained a contract with employers that provided a total wage increase of *four cents an hour* over three years. This is a problematic increase when we compare it with the substantial wage gains made by the San Francisco’s painters union, DC 8, in their 1965 strike; Benson 2005). Although the leadership failed to bargain pro-labor contracts, the June 1958 edition of the administration’s journal *District Council 9 News* illustrates its strong influence on the membership’s vote:

In an unprecedented demonstration of confidence in and support for the progressive policies of the Rarback administration during the past 11 years, the membership of our Union [*sic*] have again, unanimously, re-elected Secretary-Treasurer Martin Rarback for the eighth consecutive time. The entire slate of business agents, who are also part of the Council’s working team, were also re-elected, unanimously. (District Council No. 9 Collection, box 7).

What the paper did not reveal, however, is that there were very often opposition candidates from militant caucuses, who were systematically barred from participation in elections, a violation of Article X, section 1 of the by-laws (Schonfeld Papers, box 14). The leadership accomplished this by punishing, in various ways, those oppositionists that made themselves visible in the open hand voting system or in campaigning exchanges (French Papers, box 1, folder 8). The effect was that for nine years, the Rarback regime managed to dissuade or prevent opponents from running opposition candidates, largely through tactics that did not rely on employers. This is despite the fact that by the early 1960s, DC 9 workers received the lowest wages in the building trades (Hall Papers, box 1, folder 3).⁶

According to the rank-and-file dissidents, Rarback and the business agents maintained their positions through an elaborate system of coercion. Rank-and-file reformer David Barish suggested that

Rarback perpetuated himself in power, with the aid of the old gang [business agents], by a combination of election fraud and membership intimidation. He eliminated photographs in dues books and ended the practice of signing the election register at the polling place. This made it simple to hand out loose union books to crooked voters and pass phoney [*sic*] voters through the lines. Voting booths were left open. Watchers for

opposition candidates were not allowed into some locals. In the locals, members who stood up on behalf of rival candidates, or volunteered to be their election watchers, were often blacklisted from their jobs. (UDIA Collection)

Within this context, several localized rank-and-file movements coalesced with the intent of ending the administration's control of the union.

Dissidents centered around Local 1011 proved the most successful at forming a caucus to challenge staff power. In 1960, led by Frank Schonfeld, the group formed the Committee for Democracy, which eventually developed a base of support within the union by challenging union corruption and demanding a firmer stance against concessions to management (Schonfeld 1994). In the initial years, the organized caucus members never totaled more than one or two dozen activists, but they were able to secure a large amount of membership sympathy.⁷ As an article in dissident paper *Union Democracy in Action* noted, "Enough painters are convinced to organize a growing movement for reform. They are using democratic rights to demand more democracy within their union" (UDIA Collection).

The local had a history of radicalism, membership participation and mobilization. This rank-and-file engagement and militancy in Local 1011 resulted in business agents who were less influenced by employers than elsewhere in the district council. In 1961, with the help of a court order pursued by the Committee for Democracy that restricted Rarback from flooding the local with voters, Schonfeld received the nomination within his union local to run against Rarback for the position of secretary-treasurer.

The events of the 1961 election demonstrate one way in which the leadership was able to suppress the democratic reformers with economic intimidation, again without *direct* employer assistance. In Local 892, Burton Hall noted,

During its run-off election, and during its election for local officers, held a few weeks later, shop foremen and employer-appointed stewards walked about the election hall intimidating members whose jobs they controlled; voting booths were open on one side, making "secrecy" a farce; union officials, on repeated occasions, walked into voting booths while members were voting; voters were forbidden to cast their ballots themselves but were required to hand them to a union official, who manipulated them to see how the members had voted. (Hall Papers, box 1, folder 3)

This violated by-law provisions. For instance, "No electioneering shall be permitted in the polling place" (Article X, section 12), and "No person shall enter the voting machine with any voter" (Article X, section 14) (Schonfeld Papers, box 14).

As a result, Rarback won with 3,720 votes against Schonfeld's 1,916. The establishment journal noted, "The membership is clearly indicating a resounding vote of confidence in their capable, hard-working Secretary-Treasurer" (Winn Papers, box 7, folder 6). On the contrary, the victory is an example of the pervasive election fraud in DC 9 under the Rarback administration. For instance, the union leadership limited

the distribution of Schonfeld's campaign literature to only eight of the district's twelve affiliated union locals (which he carried in the election) (Hall 1972). Additionally, in several locals, such as 442 and 1087, leaders physically barred Schonfeld from speaking to the rank and file, while facilitating Rarback's appearances (UDIA Collection). This is despite mandates in the union constitution that restrict such behavior (Vertical File IBPAT, folder 1). Moreover, Schonfeld's attorney was not permitted to access the voting floor in several of the locals, even when business agents were openly campaigning for Rarback.

After Rarback's election, fifteen rank-and-file oppositionists were brought to separate trials by the leadership. The charges included "conduct unbecoming of a member" and "engaging in activities that tended to bring the local or other subordinate bodies into disrepute," among others (UDIA Collection). These were legitimate charges according to the section 266 of the IBPAT constitution (Vertical File IBPAT, folder 1). These members joined other oppositionists brought up on similar charges before the elections were finalized. Rarback himself selected the trial committee (UDIA Collection). As an indication of how the trials were viewed by the membership, a rank and file member speaking to the dealings of Local 504 noted that it "has in its leadership a reasonable facsimile of a Gestapo kangaroo court" (French Papers, box 1, folder 1). But a critical turn of events took place in the trial of Solomon Salzhandler, which affected both the insurgents and the broader labor movement.

Salzhandler, a member of Local 442, had been charged by the president-business agent of his local for having asserted in a leaflet that the president had wrongly handled union finances, a charge that would ultimately be found to be true in court (French Papers, box 1, folder 4). After Salzhandler lost his union rights, however, Schonfeld secured the counsel of labor attorney Burton Hall (Schonfeld 1994). They took the case to federal court to contest Salzhandler's discipline as a violation of his right of free speech, specified in the LMRDA. The favorable court decision made unenforceable any provision of a union constitution that made dissident statements punishable, establishing the basic right of free speech within union organizations (H. Benson, author interview, 2008). This basic change led to a huge growth in the Committee for Democracy's membership; whereas before the court decision, about two dozen activists were coming to caucus meetings, now there were hundreds directly participating (Benson 2005:49).

Throughout this period, union leaders colluded with painting contractors over work site violations, but it was not central to repression during the initial phases of the movement (F. Schonfeld, author interview, 2008). The indictment and conviction of Samuel Lemkin in 1949, president of Local 442 and prominent member of the union's leadership, publicly exposed collusion in the Rarback regime for the first time (Hall Papers, box 1, folder 3). The court found Lemkin guilty of conspiring with the president of a contracting firm to defraud New York City. Collusion of this kind led to an opening of the electoral system to the rank-and-file resisters, and a momentary breakdown in the staff's power.

Rarback had received \$840,000 in bribe money from employers in return for discriminatory enforcement of the painters' collective bargaining agreements. This ultimately led, in 1966, to his indictment by the New York Grand Jury on fifty counts of bribery, conspiracy, and collusive bid rigging (which he was later convicted of). In the midst of the public debacle, General President Raftery of the IBPAT used a trusteeship, led by John Damery, to take over the affairs of DC 9 (French Papers, box 1, folder 8). Despite the apparent change in guard, the Rarback regime remained in control. Appointed to the newly created position "director of organization and education," Rarback retained his authority informally from the sidelines (Benson 2005:45). Moreover, the business agents remained in their positions, still supporting his return. As one blacklisted rank-and-file member noted of his own business agent in Local 490, "he is one of Rarback's most ardent supporters. We wonder why! By his record it could be that they have been scratching each other [*sic*] back all along!" (French Papers, box 1, folder 8).

Once again, Burton Hall came to the legal defense of the rank and file. Representing 19 rank-and-file members, including Schonfeld, Hall brought a suit to federal court in 1967 challenging the trusteeship, in pursuant of Title III of LMRDA, as unlawful (Hall 1972). After seven days of hearings, Judge Marvin Frankel issued a decision that deemed the trusteeship illegal and mandated a new election for the position of secretary-treasurer. He asserted, "The evidence showed that the reported votes for the 'administration' position far exceeded the number of those who had appeared at the polling places" (District Council No. 9 Collection, box 6). Given the difficult situation within DC 9, action taken at the state level was necessary to advance the movement. The court's decision constitutes a pivotal transition, opening up the electoral space for the Committee for Democracy.

On September 6, 1967, Schonfeld once again ran for secretary-treasurer against Rarback. In this round, Schonfeld defeated Rarback 3,230 votes to 2,529 (Benson 2005). However, the power of the position was not proportional to the combined power of the business agents. When Schonfeld won, his slate could not carry the machine; the majority of the old-guard business agents remained in their positions. Because the business agents retained control over the distribution of jobs, the rank and file reelected them to maintain employment. This was not merely out of fear, as the voting place occasionally provided secrecy. Instead, it was that such patronage created real loyalty among the ranks. As rank-and-file member turned business agent David Barish (1994) asserted, "the locals would re-elect them, membership was looking out for themselves so they re-elected them." Given these conditions, the business agents were able to secure their positions in the union, while Rarback was uprooted from his. Ultimately, the former were more powerful than the latter, having control of the most effective means to repress or prevent dissidence: membership employment.

With their leverage over workers manifested primarily at the level of the union locals, the business agents began to organize a concerted effort to undermine the

rank and file's democratizing agenda (Eckersdorf 1994). If the business agent could control the well-being of the members and their families, he or she could be manipulated to withhold overt support for democratization and militant reform. Accordingly, Schonfeld tried to combat the old tactics of the business agents with a series of reforms. However, almost immediately, the business agents used their relationships with employers to suppress the elements of the rank and file that had elected him.

A role of the business agent was to report on the employers' jobs in both oral and written forms (Schonfeld Papers, box 13). This gave the employers incentives to formulate lucrative deals with the business agents that agreed to overlook work site violations. Because of this dynamic, the business agents in DC 9 were very often directly cooperating with employers (Barish 1994). However, it was only after Schonfeld was elected that they explicitly cooperated to blacklist dissidents.

After Schonfeld became secretary-treasurer, he disbanded the hiring hall to deal with corruption around hiring practices. Schonfeld believed that the hiring hall was unmanageable because of a lack of reformers in positions to run it (F. Schonfeld, author interview, 2008). Without a hiring hall, the membership secured work directly from the employers, through a "shape-up." In this context, the business agents used their relations with employers to bypass this change: the employer would only hire those business agent-approved union members. Thus, even without the hiring hall, the business agents were able to manipulate the membership through their control of employment. The use of blacklists undermined grassroots support for Schonfeld. The cost of job loss was too great for much of the membership (H. Benson, author interview, 2008). The headline of an election flyer from 1946 in DC 9 captured some of the dynamics and frustrations in the late 1960s when it asked, "Why should the business agents be bigger than the organization?" (Schonfeld Papers, box 11, folder 8).

To be sure, Schonfeld had not been an inactive secretary-treasurer. For instance, wages had doubled, rising from \$4.20 an hour to \$7.35. Basic pensions rose from \$90 to \$130 a month, a 44 percent increase. And moreover, with the help of the LMDRA, his administration eliminated election fraud (District Council No. 9 Collection, box 6). However, business agents and employers were able to bring in a new wave of workers who were loyal to them through their power to dictate job allotment, laying the groundwork for Schonfeld's electoral defeat and the pacification of the Committee for Democracy. Schonfeld's gains and the movement to democratize the union were ultimately insufficient; one needs a job to enjoy the benefits of democratic unionism.

In 1973, Schonfeld lost the secretary-treasurer position to Jimmy Bishop, a mob-backed representative of the old regime. Bishop's victory, despite the clear rank-and-file alternative, is indicative of newer workers' protecting the jobs that business agents provided them⁸ and older workers making the choice to keep their jobs and secure their positions, rather than risk the possibility of the blacklist and possible loss of pensions.

Staff Power in Varying Contexts

Frank Schonfeld's election to the position of secretary-treasurer in 1967 provides a useful turning point by which to separate the case into two distinct contexts to test and retest my hypothesis about job allocation. Capturing the position afforded the Committee for Democracy and the supportive rank and file a new means of instituting change. Through the position of secretary-treasurer, the dissidents established "free speech" in the union, ended election fraud, and won contracts that were more pro-labor. Importantly, Schonfeld also disbanded the hiring hall. In this way, the position, won through struggle, altered the landscape of conditions that the movement faced and the context in which the staff was able to act in critical ways. In particular, without electoral fraud, internal trials to discipline dissidents, and the hiring hall, suppression now required explicit staff-employer collusion. By comparing the two phases, I will identify both the specific conditions that led to the electoral success of the Committee for Democracy and the specific conditions that led to the movement's subsequent failure to maintain the momentum for lasting change. While my emphasis is distinct from the conditions emphasized in much of the literature, what is most interesting is how staff adapted to rank-and-file challenges and how staff's capacity to dictate job allocation was driven by different factors in the two contexts. The failed rebellion illustrates that an emphasis needs to be put on the dynamics between union staff and employment, and how that relationship conditions the possibility of reform from below.

Context I: 1947 to 1967, the Corrupt Hiring Hall

Many of the conditions emphasized in the literature were present in the early stage of the movement. In terms of Stepan-Norris and Zeitlin's (2003) emphasis on earlier red organizing, the case study demonstrates that both the Rank-and-File Caucus and the Progressive Caucus, preceding the Committee for Democracy, were originally organized around radical political platforms. The Rank-and-File Caucus, in power until the 1947 election, was led by members of the Communist Party and had originally challenged the leadership on a platform of democracy. However, many leaders were eventually co-opted, and union official corruption continued to thrive under their administration's tenure. Furthermore, the Progressive Caucus was originally led by members of the Socialist Workers Party. Rarback himself was a member until he resigned after Taft-Hartley's 1947 noncommunist affidavit made it compulsory. However, again, the Progressive Caucus and its leaders eventually developed very corrupted forms of administration (H. Benson, author interview, 2008). While earlier radicalism led to the development of factions and subgroups within the union and was a precondition of the democratic movement itself, such factors did not change the constraints that those subgroups faced.

In relation to *tactics*, the Committee for Democracy succeeded in instituting democratic structures within its movement. Fulfilling the requirement of Nyden (1985) for movement success, the caucus countered management's co-optive pressures by strengthening the democratic links between the rank and file and caucus leaders. They did this by distributing leaflets, organizing regular meetings to establish caucus policy, working with a consistent political platform, and maintaining a high level of visibility between elections and around nonelection issues (Alfarone 1994). Interviews and archival materials demonstrate that few, if any, of the rank-and-file dissidents were co-opted by union officials or employers. This resulted in strategies that went beyond securing votes around election time. Instead, the caucus sought to institute change in the union structure around issues that affected the rank and file's daily lives. While important in maintaining a committed core of dissidents, on balance this approach was overpowered by the staff.

Before Schonfeld was elected, the movement faced a number of staff barriers to success. These included the following: bringing in autonomous locals for voting purposes only, which allowed the administration to ensure votes; electoral fraud; disciplining dissident members through union trials; and blacklisting dissidents from work through the hiring hall, many of the same processes that have been identified in the literature (Barbash 1970; Buhle 1999; Cohen 2006; Foster 1927; Glaberman 2002; Kirshbaum 1940; La Botz 1990; Licht and Barron 1978; Moody 1988, 2007; Peck 1963; Seidman 1938; Van Tine 1973).

The Committee for Democracy's gains in mobilizing rank-and-file support and winning elections was highly contingent on neutralizing these barriers. Movement intensification combined with the LMDRA and legal victories were central for this. For instance, union trials resulted in several rank-and-file members losing their union privileges when the administration attempted to purge the union of dissidents after the 1961 race between Rarback and Schonfeld (which the latter lost). But by engaging in open and visible forms of repression, seen particularly in the Salzhandler case, the leadership exposed itself to criticism from both below and above. From below, it actually invigorated the dissident movement. At the same time, it created the conditions to bring legal sanctions on the administration from above. For instance, the Salzhandler case established the basic right of free speech within the union, a change that led to an increase in the Committee for Democracy's membership (Benson 2005:49).

However, this is ultimately a story about the *staff- and employer-generated barriers* and their ability to counter rank-and-file challenges. When business agents exhausted the means for repression within the union, the corrupt hiring hall, they sought more direct support from the employers, who were increasingly interested in blocking the insurgents. This is because the latter group represented a more militant form of trade unionism, one that was intent on resisting business unionism and making larger demands.

Context II: 1967 to 1973, Staff-Employer Collusion

After the election, the Committee for Democracy maintained the internal democratic structures that linked insurgent members to insurgent leaders as best it could. Initially, using the powers of the position of Secretary-Treasurer, Schonfeld actually *increased* the democratic participation and militancy of the more general rank and file. For instance, in 1968, the union took part in the first membership-mandated districtwide strike in over twenty years (Schonfeld 1994). The strike broke a tiered pay scale and led to increases in workers' wages and pensions. Furthermore, Schonfeld enforced a rule in the by-laws that made the regular rotation of shop stewards mandatory. Previously, many bought their positions from business agents. Instead of representing the rank and file, the stewards would often act in ways that imposed discipline on them (Barish 1994). This change helped move toward a more democratic form of shop floor governance.

Clearly, following Nyden's (1985:1193) condition for success, "leaders themselves" made the maintenance of democracy central to their objectives. However, while the leadership maintained membership-led decision making and regularly communicated with their base, the effectiveness of such actions declined. Their base was literally being undermined by processes outside of the caucus itself. In contrast to Nyden, insurgents could not create the conditions for their own success in DC 9.

Despite the electoral victory, democratic reforms on and outside of the shop floor, and a more militant stance toward employers, the Committee for Democracy remained highly constrained by the staff, confirming Michels's ([1915] 1962) and Foster's (1927) suggestion that the leadership's role takes causal precedence. After Schonfeld was elected secretary-treasurer, he disbanded the hiring hall that was used by business agents to control job allocation. In its absence, the business agents quickly used previous collusion with management. Business agents overlooked work site violations for both monetary returns and the ability to dictate which rank-and-file members were hired. This restrained the momentum of the rank-and-file insurgents. The democracy of the union, in this sense, was subordinated to the objective conditions of its members.

The business agents' ability to control the work of the membership through employers gave them the power to block the offensives of the Committee for Democracy. Given that it was in their interest to maintain undemocratic power relations, business agents sought strategies that would reinforce them. However, it was their relationship with employers that afforded them the capacity to do so after the hiring hall was disbanded. This allowed the staff to bypass formal and democratic changes (both by-law amendments and the enforcement of existing regulations) made by the Committee for Democracy after taking office. A blacklist was implemented by the officials *outside* the union (through the employers control over hiring). The mechanism of hiring became the means to suppress dissidents (Foster 1927), and it was the relationship with the employer that the staff activated that allowed them to pursue such a tactic. Staff and employer cooperation around hiring constitutes the primary reason for the Committee for Democracy's eventual failure.

Conclusion

Research on staff dominance in unions and other organizations has disproportionately focused on how such dominance develops. Much less thought has gone into identifying why so many rank-and-file movements for democratic change fail. Recent studies that do, tend to focus on the traits of the general membership, the tactics used by rank-and-file movements, and barriers posed by staff and employers. And with regard to recent work, the presence of subgroups, earlier red organizing, and a movement that adopts democratic internal practices are important preconditions to successful democratization. But the rebellion in DC 9 illustrates that while many of the conditions for success emphasized in recent scholarship were present, ultimate failure was due to union characteristics that afforded staff the ability to allocate jobs at their own discretion. I show specifically that in DC 9, staff capacity to repress dissidents through work allocation was generated in one period through a corrupt hiring hall and, in a later period, through collusive relationships between employers. In both phases, employment was the primary means by which staff disciplined the membership.

Along these lines, a renewed emphasis needs to be put on the power relations within unions, primarily between the staff and the rank and file, but contextualized within the broader dynamics of employment relations. Insights in the literature concerning the independent interests of staff need to be reintroduced into the debate and further theorized. Specifically, as I have attempted in this article, researchers should identify what constitutes staff power and how this power varies over the duration of a movement when the union's organizational characteristics are altered through struggles for reform. The key here is that dissident movements cannot rely on the internal development of democracy and radicalism; they must also disempower the leadership by altering the rules of the organization or voting corrupt officials out of office. The cost of losing jobs made both strategies unlikely to succeed in DC 9. However, a deeper understanding of the sources of staff power might illuminate chokepoints where it can be undermined.

As past research has shown (Stepan-Norris and Zeitlin 2003), the form that union organization takes—be it democratic, staff dominated, or somewhere in between—has an impact on the living conditions of its members as well as on their power vis-à-vis management. Simply put, the contracts won by democratic unions in the American labor movement have tended to be more prolabor than their moderate or staff-dominated counterparts. Because of the outcomes that they generate, it is essential to ground our understanding of these dynamics in the real processes that occur within the union organization.

However, this article raises a significant number of questions about these processes that cannot be answered here. For instance, how central is the use of firing to the failure of other union democracy movements inside and outside the building trades? Have union democracy movements succeeded despite staff control of work? If so, how? What are other forms that staff power takes? In different contexts, which

are more vulnerable to rank-and-file challenge than others? What conditions intensify or minimize collusion between employers and union officials? How do we theorize this collusion more richly? And how does staff power reproduce itself in the absence of movements for reform? Each of these questions must be pursued in future research. Furthermore, they demand more case comparisons.

Analyses of this sort advance our understanding of the failures of reform efforts in the late 1960s and early 1970s in the American labor movement. While numerous radical rank-and-file caucuses and groups strove to democratize oligarchic unions, none fully realized those goals. And those that did manage to uproot undemocratic portions of the leadership, such as the painters of DC 9, eventually saw those advances lost. To grasp the possibilities of success, labor scholars must first understand the reasons for recurring failures.

Notes

1. This is consistent with much of the work on business unionism (e.g., Buhle 1999) and theories of oligarchy (Michels [1915] 1962).

2. See Voss and Sherman (2000) for a discussion of how conservative tactics are overcome within union organizations.

3. All of the archival sources can be found at the Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives in the Tamiment Library at New York University.

4. In most industries, national agreements set by the international union simply set a bare minimum standard for wages and conditions. Domestic bargaining is in fact the primary means to achieve acceptable terms (Hyman and Fryer 1978:167). The International Brotherhood of Painters and Allied Trades worked in the same way. Hence, in looking at the contracts that local unions were able to win, there is large variation in terms.

5. A member of the AFL-CIO, DC 9 was then an affiliate of the International Brotherhood of Painters and Allied Trades (IBPAT). However, today, IBPAT is called the International Union of Painters and Allied Trades.

6. For instance, by 1962, the average wage rate in DC 9 was \$3.77 per hour, far below \$4.25 per hour in Brooklyn and Queens and \$4.40 per hour in Nassau County. Comparably, though, this rate is significantly higher than the federal minimum wage at the time, \$1.15, which the New York State minimum wage was generally in line with (New York State Department of Labor 2006).

7. DC 9 had approximately 12,000 members during this period (Benson 2005:49).

8. There was an influx of 1,500 new members into the union in the previous five years (Winn Papers, box 7, folder 24).

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