

## What is Union Democracy?

We boast of a "free labor movement" in the United States. To be truly free the labor movement must guarantee certain freedoms to its members: the right of free speech in the shop and on the union floor; free press—the right to distribute leaflets and papers to fellow-members without censorship; free assembly—the right to meet with fellow unionists to discuss union affairs and form caucuses; fair elections with an honest count; fair trials before impartial trial committees. To put it in a nutshell: union democracy means civil liberties for members inside their unions.

**There is no effective substitute for strong, democratic unions to defend the workers' standard of living, their safety on the job, their working conditions, and their dignity as employees.** And there is no substitute for internal union democracy to combat racketeering, get rid of corruption, and oust self-serving officials. Unions were created to serve the interests of all their members. Only democratic unions can be depended upon to fulfill this purpose effectively.

In many unions democratic rights are as real and unquestioned as in most of American society. They are written into federal law, enshrined in union tradition, extolled by union leaders. But in large sections of the American labor movement these rights are trampled upon and must be restored. Anti-union employers and their ideologues and publicists spread the notion that racketeering and violation of democratic rights are inherent features of trade unionism. But they are not. They debase, distort and undermine the very foundations of genuine unionism.

### Who Needs Democracy?

Everyone who already belongs to a union or who needs one also needs union democracy. But in addition, union democracy is so important to our whole society that unions are the only type of non-governmental organization for which Congress has found it essential to legislate democratic rights.

In the Wagner Act (1934) Congress determined that the public interest required the right of workers to select unions of their own choosing for collective bargaining. In the Landrum Griffin Act (1959) Congress determined that the public interest also required that workers have the right to elect union officials of their own choosing. To this end the law contains a "bill of rights" for union members modeled after the Bill of Rights in the U.S. Constitution.

In legislating for democratic unionism, Congress was not serving some narrow pressure group intent on special privileges. It recognized rather that a free, democratic labor movement is a distinguishing mark of a free nation; that for millions of members, democracy within their unions has an impact on their

daily lives even greater than civic freedom in general; that only a membership armed with democratic rights can get rid of racketeering and end the looting of union health and pension funds; and that all Americans benefit from a clean, democratic labor movement.

Who needs union democracy? All of us. When democracy is repressed in any union, the bell tolls for all American democracy.

### Who Fought for Democracy?

The men and women who have worked and fought for their democratic rights in the labor movement are numbered in the thousands. Some even died in the cause. Only a few people knew about Dow Wilson and Lloyd Green, murdered in San Francisco in 1966 because they led the fight against corruption in their Painters union. Four years later, the name of Jock Yablonski became nationally known when he was murdered, along with his wife and daughter, for leading the fight to democratize the United MineWorkers. "Union democracy," said Yablonski, "is the single most important issue in the campaign for election of a new UMW president."

Only a few knew of Frank Schonfeld's battle to reform the Painters union in New York City in the '60s but Ed Sadlowski's efforts for honest elections in the Steelworkers, beginning in the early '70s, were known to millions. Most impressive was the rise of an effective reform movement in the Teamsters union beginning in the '70s and continuing with increasing strength to this very day. In a union whose top leadership was infiltrated by organized crime, where dissent can mean discharge, beatings, and even murder, the survival and growth of the Teamsters for a Democratic Union is a token of the great power of the union democracy principle.

### Who Uses Democracy?

Union reformers are usually referred to as "dissidents" or "insurgents" or "rebels." But these labels are inadequate. Like reformers everywhere, union reformers are critics of the status quo in their organizations and of the officials who run them.

Actually, by standing up for democracy and decency union reformers work for social justice in their arena of life, just as others do in their own. There are civil libertarians, and civil rights activists, and consumer advocates, and peace workers, and fighters for women's rights and dedicated union leaders. And there are also union reformers.

## Our Mission

The Association for Union Democracy (AUD) is the only national organization dedicated solely to the following purposes:

1. "To further the knowledge and understanding of democratic principles and practices in American labor organizations by research, publications and conferences.
2. "To render assistance to members of labor organizations in securing and insuring their enjoyment of their legal rights as such members, where the enjoyment of such rights is threatened or infringed upon."

AUD publishes Union Democracy Review and other literature which report on the efforts of union reformers and analyze developments in the field of union democracy law. The Association has advised thousands of unionists on their rights and how to defend them. It helps them find lawyers to serve at reduced fees, free of charge or on contingency.

Among the unionists who have come to AUD for assistance or advice are electricians, operating engineers, furriers, teamsters, painters, civil service employees, steelworkers, miners, seamen, bricklayers, hospital workers, postal employees, and many others.

Unionists with internal union democracy problems are frequently referred to AUD by lawyers, labor educators, fellow unionists, members of AUD's Boards, and by government personnel. A special women's project helps women unionists who need advice on how to utilize their legal rights inside their unions.

Under work-study and internship programs, AUD helps train law students in its field. Some have gone on to careers in union democracy or other public service law.

The Association is a clearinghouse for information about union democracy for reporters, magazine writers, students and professors. Its expertise is sought by researchers, attorneys and government agencies. Amicus curiae briefs have been filed on its

behalf in key cases. (A detailed description of current activities is available from the AUD office.)

AUD sponsors the Union Democracy Worker Education Project, the Women's Project for Union Democracy, and the Workers' Rights Clinic. (See about AUD for more information.)

## Who Pays the Bills?

AUD would, of course, welcome financial support without strings from legitimate unions.

Unfortunately, however, our experience has been that, with a few notable exceptions, even labor leaders who are themselves honest and democratic are chary of supporting union reformers. AUD's funds therefore have come from individual unionists and others who believe that America needs a strong, democratic labor movement, and from a small number of foundations which support liberal and charitable causes and which recognize the Association's unique contribution to democracy in America. Please join AUD and contribute what you can.

© Copyright 2000, The Association for Union Democracy.  
[www.uniondemocracy.org](http://www.uniondemocracy.org)

500 State Street, Brooklyn NY 11217; 718-855-6650; 718-855-6799(fax); [aud@igc.org](mailto:aud@igc.org)

Permission is granted to workers, rank and file union groups, unions, community-based workers organizations, and worker education/labor studies programs to reproduce sections of this site for free distribution. If you do this, please notify The Association for Union Democracy at [aud@igc.org](mailto:aud@igc.org). Send comments or suggestions on the site to [aud@igc.org](mailto:aud@igc.org).