

What is Trade Union Bureaucracy? A Theoretical Account

— David Camfield¹

‘Union bureaucracy’ is an important yet vexed term in the study of trade unions and in radical politics. At worst, it can be a label pinned by left-wing activists on those union officers whose actions or beliefs are seen as repugnant. This usage confers the label of ‘bureaucrat’ on some union officials but not on those whose behaviour is seen as praiseworthy. The term is also used in a more serious way. Many critical analysts (and others) have drawn attention to the existence of a layer of full-time union officers and staff and argued that this group of people – ‘the trade union bureaucracy’ – plays a conservative role in unions. There are many versions of this kind of analysis of ‘the bureaucracy,’ some much more insightful than others. Yet there have been scarcely any recent attempts to refine and present a coherent theory of union bureaucracy.² Unfortunately, it remains the case that in the study of unions, as John Kelly (1988) argued over two decades ago, ‘Rarely is the term “bureaucracy” defined or its use justified on any theoretical grounds, and it is normally unclear which of several different definitions is actually being employed’ (p.155). Moreover, theories of ‘the trade union bureaucracy’ understood as a group of people can function as blinkers to a critical understanding of the character of union activity itself. A focus on official leaderships can lead us to ignore or neglect how union activity happens, how the relations among members and between officials and members are organized. To put the same point

-
- 1 David Camfield teaches Labour Studies at the University of Manitoba and is the author of *Canadian Labour in Crisis: Reinventing the Workers’ Movement* (2011). Thanks to David McNally, Charlie Post, Alan Sears and Sheila Wilmot for discussions about some of the ideas in this article, earlier versions of which were presented at the Annual Meetings of the *Society for Socialist Studies* in 2009 and at the 2010 Toronto *Historical Materialism* conference.
 - 2 Brenner (1986), Leier (1991) and some of the essays collected in Hyman (1989) represent original contributions that attempt to clarify the character of union bureaucracy. The past two decades have seen very few theoretical contributions on this question. Darlington and Upchurch (2012) is a notable exception.

differently, bureaucratic forms of social practice in union organizations risk escaping examination when 'the bureaucracy' is the centre of our field of vision. When this happens, the result is a very partial understanding of unions as working-class movement organisations.

Consequently, this article proposes an alternative theoretical account of union bureaucracy and union officialdom (members who hold elected or appointed union office, and union staff). This account seeks to incorporate the best insights of the tradition of critical analysis of 'the trade union bureaucracy' (full-time union officials) into a theoretical framework founded on an original conceptualization of bureaucracy as a particular mode of existence of social relations, whose relevance is not limited to the study of unions.³ The development of an explicit conceptualization of bureaucracy as a social phenomenon and, on that foundation, an account of union bureaucracy is intended to address the problem of theoretical unclarity identified by Kelly. Another reason for addressing the nature of bureaucracy itself is that Marxist writers on bureaucracy (e.g. Mandel, 1992) have tended to pay relatively little attention to theorizing the phenomenon at the most basic level, in contrast to the care paid to concepts such as class. The account proposed here attempts to grasp core processes of bureaucratization within unions in capitalist societies. It identifies the sources of bureaucracy in unions as wage-labour contracts, the separation of conception from execution in human practical activity, the political administration of unions by state power and union officialdom. The perspective advanced encourages analysis that combines attention to different manifestations of bureaucracy throughout union organizations with examination of the specific role of full-time officers and staff (rather than one or the other). The article concludes with a brief discussion of how this theory directs our attention in the analysis of contemporary unions, with specific reference to the US and Canada.

TRADE UNION BUREAUCRACY AS THE OFFICIALDOM

When the concept of union bureaucracy is used in a serious fashion (rather than as a superficial political criticism), it usually refers to a *group of people*. This is how the concept figures in classic sociological studies such as Robert Michels's oft-cited book of a century ago on

3 An anonymous reviewer pointed out that this theory could be used to scrutinize the "NGOization" of social movements" and "the relationship between NGOs and social movements," but I am unable to address those issues here.

working-class movement organizations (1966)⁴ and C Wright Mills's 1948 book on US union officials, *The New Men of Power* (2001, p.224). Union bureaucracy is equated with a group of people by most Marxist writers. For Ernest Mandel (1992), it is a layer of full-time officials that has carried out 'the usurpation of decision-making power' within the union organisation; a stratum of full-timers who have not accomplished this are 'an incipient bureaucracy' (p.68). For Alex Callinicos (1995), the union bureaucracy is 'a social layer made up of full time officials with a material interest in confining the class struggle to the search for reforms within a capitalist framework' (p.16). Robert Brenner (1985) uses the term in a similar manner, and many more examples of this kind could be cited. This usage is also common among non-Marxist radicals. For example, historian Mark Leier (1991) advances a perspective on union bureaucracy influenced by the anarchist Mikhail Bakunin. Leier argues that the bureaucracy is made up of leaders whose 'offices are protected from immediate and effective control by the membership' (p.420). By including shop stewards as part of the bureaucracy (p.424), Leier differs with the previously-mentioned writers, but he shares with them the idea that the term 'union bureaucracy' refers to a group of people.

In identifying the widespread use of the term trade union bureaucracy in this sense, I do not want to imply that all those who use it in this manner theorize union bureaucracy in the same way or equally well. For example, Callinicos (1995) argues that union struggle within capitalist society inevitably requires compromises with capital, which must be negotiated by workers' representatives. Some of these representatives become full-time officials and 'the effect, whatever the beliefs of the officials, is to isolate them from those they represent.' Removed from the paid workplace and no longer employed by capital, they 'come to see negotiation, compromise, the reconciliation of capital and labour as the very stuff of trade unionism' (p.17) and oppose struggle because it threatens negotiations and union funds. Mandel (1992)'s theory is different in important respects. In *Power and Money*, he sees the 'cultural underdevelopment' of the working class (the normal 'status of the proletariat under the rule of capital') as the basis of union bureaucracy (p.60). At the same time, he identifies an inexorable organizational logic that creates a bureaucracy: 'the development of mass political or trade-union organisations is incon-

4 While Michels's focus is on political parties and he does not use the exact term 'union bureaucracy,' his work considers unions as well as parties and his discussion of party bureaucracy equates it with a group of people. See the comments on Michels by Perusek (1995).

ceivable without an apparatus of full-timers and functionaries. At the most basic level, it is impossible to collect, centralise and administer the dues of a million members through purely voluntary labour' (p.59). Leier (1991)'s notion of bureaucracy is different again, as he argues that the bureaucracy's 'distinguishing characteristic...is their power over the membership' (p.420). My point is simply that these writers share a certain understanding: union bureaucracy means the labour officialdom.

The strengths and weaknesses of these specific accounts is not my concern here, though it is worth pointing out that they are all more sound theoretical efforts than Michels's belief in an iron law of oligarchy rooted in the allegedly universal incompetence of 'the masses' and the inherent nature of organization itself (Michels, 1966; Barker, 2001; Perusek, 1995) or Lenin's influential but deeply flawed idea that union officials are conservative because they are part of a 'labour aristocracy' bribed with imperialist super-profits (Lenin, 1920; Post, 2011). These theories highlight the significance of the existence of layers of union officials, particularly full-time officers and staff, and nothing that follows should be interpreted as dismissing the importance of this social phenomenon, to which I will return.

The most important problem common to such accounts is that their focus on full-time union officials is conducive to neglecting how union activity is socially organized more broadly. At worst, it can lead to a depiction of union officialdom as a rotten crust beneath which lies a pure, untainted organization and membership. Another pitfall is that in situations where there are few or no full-time officials – as is the case in many smaller union locals in the US and Canada – the theory implies by definition that bureaucracy is not a significant issue, since there are few or no bureaucrats present. Above all, focusing on the head can, so to speak, lead to neglect of the body. For example, Callinicos (1995) devotes most of a chapter on 'Capitalism, the unions and union leaders' to 'the union bureaucracy.' It says very little about how relations between officers (whether lay, to use the British term for workers holding union office who remain on the job, or full-time) and other members are organized in the country whose unions are at the centre of the book, the UK. It also pays scant attention to the nature of collective bargaining relations or how the regulation of unions by state power (the political administration [Neocleous, 1996] of unions) influences UK unions, including the officialdom. Questions about the condition of union organization in paid workplaces

and in branches (union locals), levels of member participation and control, the relationship between unionized workers and the non-unionized majority of the working class and the gender and racial order within British unions are raised barely or not at all. This kind of critical analysis leaves many important dimensions of a union movement unexamined or treats them as of little importance. The elaboration and defence by Ralph Darlington and Martin Upchurch (2012) of the same theoretical perspective on full-time union officials for which Callinicos argues is less narrow in scope. However, it has little to say about unions as bureaucratic organizations, rather than the character of the stratum of officials at their head.

This suggests that to identify bureaucracy with 'the bureaucracy' is too limited a notion. We need a theoretical approach that embraces other phenomena too, not just full-time officials. If union bureaucracy is not to be equated with the officialdom, what is it? Richard Hyman (1989) has proposed that bureaucracy in unions is 'a corrosive pattern of *internal social relations* manifest in a differential distribution of expertise and activism; in a dependence of the mass of union members on the initiative and experience of a relatively small group of leaders – both official *and* 'unofficial'' (p.246). To distinguish bureaucracy as a social relation from union officers and staff as a group, one can use the term 'labour officialdom' to refer to the latter. From this perspective, to the degree that the relationship between members and the officers and staff is one of dependence, then what we have is a bureaucratic officialdom.

This approach has the advantage of conceptually distinguishing the phenomenon of bureaucracy from that of the officialdom as a social layer. It allows us to understand many contemporary unions as *bureaucratic mass organizations* headed by particular *bureaucratic officialdoms*. Unfortunately, it also creates new problems: it severs bureaucracy from any notion of regulations that constrain agents, and its emphasis on dependence on leaders blurs the line between the problematic of bureaucracy and the broader problematic of subaltern agency, self-activity and leadership. The latter is relevant in situations where bureaucracy is absent or insignificant. For these and perhaps other reasons,⁵ Hyman's approach, while a thoughtful attempt to move beyond the limitations of a conventional Marxist theory of union bureaucracy, is flawed and unsatisfactory.

5 See Darlington and Upchurch (2012) and the rejoinder by Hyman (2012).

WHAT IS BUREAUCRACY?

To raise the level of theoretical reflection on union bureaucracy to a higher level in a way that allows us to understand many unions as bureaucratic mass organizations, it is helpful to pose the question directly: what is bureaucracy? I suggest that bureaucracy is best understood as *a mode of existence of social relations in which people's activity (labour) is organized through formal rules that limit their ability to determine its character and goals, and which they themselves are not able to alter with ease*. Although informal rules may also affect people's activity in similar ways, one of the distinguishing features of bureaucracy as a social phenomenon is the formal character of rules, as recognized by Max Weber (1952).⁶ It should also be noted that the understanding of bureaucracy suggested here does not claim that all social organization involving formal rules is bureaucratic (as might be argued by supporters of an extremely individualistic version of anarchism); rules are bureaucratic only when they limit people's ability to determine the character and goals of their own activity and cannot be easily changed by those affected.

This form of organizing social relations, while commonplace in contemporary capitalist societies, does not originate with capitalism. Bureaucracy can be found in societies that long pre-date capitalism. Anthropologist David Graeber (2006) argues that bureaucracy occurs where 'social situations...founded on structural violence' (by which he means 'forms of pervasive social inequality that are ultimately backed up by the threat of physical harm') are being managed (pp. 4-5). The development and geographical expansion of capitalism is associated with the spread of bureaucracy; as Georg Lukács (1971) noted, the concern for prediction and calculability in the capitalist enterprise observed by Weber is part of a broader drive to subject different aspects of social life to 'an increasingly *formal* and standardised treatment...in which there is an ever-increasing remoteness from the qualitative and material essence of the "things" to which bureaucratic activity pertains' (p.99).

One of the 'forms of pervasive social inequality' most relevant to bureaucracy is the separation of intellectual from manual labour and the monopolization of the former by a small number of people. Alfred Sohn-Rethel (1978) argues that intellectual labour, as distinct from manual labour, is defined by 'the use of non-empirical form-abstractions which may be represented by nothing other than non-empirical, "pure"

6 The conceptualization of bureaucracy being proposed here is obviously not Weber's. My point is simply that Weber was right to recognize the significance of formal rules to the phenomenon of bureaucracy.

concepts' (p.66). Intellectual labour in this sense, he contends, first arose with the emergence of philosophy in Greece, a development made possible by the 'non-empirical real abstraction' (p.66) involved in a 'social synthesis' – Sohn-Rethel's term for 'the network of relations by which society forms a coherent whole' (p.4) – that is 'in strict spatio-temporal separation from all acts of man's [*sic*] material interchange with nature' (p.67). Thus intellectual labour was made possible by 'the generalisation intrinsic in the monetary commensuration of commodity values promoted by coinage' (p.102). The first occurrence of coinage he dates to 'about 680 BC on the Ionian side of the Aegean, in Lydia or Phrygia' (p.59).⁷ A number of questions can be raised about Sohn-Rethel's account.⁸ However, for present purposes, what matters is that intellectual labour has been a source of bureaucracy to the extent that it has been monopolized by privileged social groups with the power to impose restrictive formal rules that organize the life activity of other people. Examples of such groups include priests and other office-holders in religious institutions and scientists in the service of state power.

A related but distinct form of domination giving rise to bureaucracy is the separation of the activity of conceptualizing the goals and methods of human activity from its execution.⁹ We can see rudimentary examples of this before the development of capitalism, for instance in rule-books of military organisation and state administration and in patriarchal laws that authorize men's control over women's labour. But it is under capitalism that the separation of conception (thinking) from execution (doing) becomes pervasive. As Cornelius Castoriadis (1988a) observed

7 According to Seaford (2012, p. 82), "opinion has now shifted to a date towards the end of the seventh century."

8 To contemporary readers Sohn-Rethel (1978)'s historical argument as presented in compressed summary here may appear as simply an example of the kind of Hellenocentrism that was so marked in Eurocentric German culture in the 1800s. For discussion of Egypt (where he locates the earliest initial manifestation of the separation of intellectual labour), Asia and Greece, see pp. 86-103. An assessment of his theoretical account would require an interrogation of both his general claim about the social conditions required for the emergence of intellectual labour and the specific geographical and historical coordinates he posits for its emergence, bearing in mind the critique of Western European Hellenocentrism raised by authors such as Goody (2006). Kapferer (1980) raises a number of questions about Sohn-Rethel's argument, including about his claim that social synthesis in ancient Greek societies was based on commodity exchange. Seaford (2012) defends Sohn-Rethel's analysis.

9 I distinguish the separation of conception from execution from the split between intellectual and manual labour in order to help us recognize examples of the former that do not involve the use of what Sohn-Rethel calls 'non-empirical form-abstractions which may be represented by nothing other than non-empirical, 'pure' concepts' and to grasp that in contemporary capitalist societies intellectual labour *itself* is subjected to the separation of conception from execution. For a brief discussion of this in the case of physics see Schmidt (2000, p. 140). Schmidt (2000) deserves to be read by anyone concerned with bureaucracy in contemporary society.

in 1960, the 'arbitrary end' of 'maximum production' 'is accomplished through the ever-heightened separation of direction and execution, by reducing workers to the status of mere executants, and by transferring the functions of management *outside* the labor process' of producing goods and services (p. 273). As Harry Braverman (1998)'s better-known and slightly later version of such an analysis argues, capitalist development fuels an 'incessant breakdown of labor processes into simplified operations taught to workers as tasks,' creating more 'labor from which all conceptual elements have been removed and along with them most of the skill, knowledge and understanding' (p.319). Even Paul Thompson (1989), who does not argue that the separation of conception from execution is a necessary feature of capitalism's organization of labour processes, recognises that competitive accumulation drives capital to reorganize production in order to reduce costs, and that this 'sets limits to the use of workers' creative capacities and constrains attempts to dispense with hierarchical relations' (p.243). Whether one accepts the stronger or the weaker claim (or an intermediate position), it is evident that the separation of conception from execution takes place on a large scale in the sphere of paid work in capitalist societies. This is a feature of labour processes in capitalist societies in all but their earliest phases, and is often enforced through formal rules. Although capitalist development creates new productive forces and patterns of workplace organisation that generate novel kinds of conceptual work, employers have historically proceeded to attempt to separate conception from execution within such new types of labour. The example of computer programming work illustrates this trend (p. 111-112).

Importantly, the process of separating conception from execution is not limited to the sphere of paid work.¹⁰ This separation is also basic to public political life in capitalist societies. In capitalist states with liberal democratic systems of government the contours of the political administration of society are decided by small numbers of elected officials and unelected high-ranking civil servants; other citizens are left to execute what is decided for them. Whether in the relations between employers

10 A merit of Castoriadis's work is his sensitivity to this, but he errs in going so far as to claim that 'the fundamental social relationship of modern capitalism' is that 'between directors and executants' (1988b, p. 201). Writing in 1963, Castoriadis displaced the relationship between capital and labour from the core of capitalist society: for classical Marxism, 'Society was seen as dominated by the abstract power of impersonal capital. Today, we see it as dominated by a hierarchical bureaucratic structure' (1993, p. 31). He contrasts 'the market' to 'bureaucratic-hierarchical organisation' as 'the central structuring moment of contemporary society' (p. 31). In so doing he wrongly conflates market with capital (value). Such a perspective is extremely ill-equipped to understand the rise of neoliberal capitalism and its current crisis.

and wage-workers or between state power and the governed, this separation is frequently accomplished by organizing people's life activity through the restrictive regulations of bureaucracy.

In the understanding proposed here, then, bureaucracy refers to a form of social relations, a way of organising social activity, rather than a group of people. This conceptualization is quite open, but also delimits the concept clearly. Bureaucracy does not encompass all situations in which people's ability to determine their own objectives and how to act are constrained. It is present when such constraint is associated with formal rules that people cannot easily change themselves. For example, a small business run in an utterly arbitrary and despotic fashion by an owner who 'micro-manages' a workforce of people carrying out extremely deskilled work and who goes to great lengths to prevent workers from having access to information about the enterprise's affairs is not a case of bureaucracy. Instead, it is a classic case of the employer control strategy that Richard Edwards (1979) dubs simple control.

This conceptualization also recognises that bureaucracy is not the only phenomenon that can impede subaltern self-activity. The phenomenon of *substitutionism* needs to be distinguished from bureaucracy. Substitutionism involves one or more persons substituting their own actions for those of a larger number of people. To put it differently, substitutionist actions are those which do not raise the level of self-activity among members of a given group. Bureaucratic methods are often substitutionist – as in the case of union rules which allow rank-and-file members little or no way to be involved in union affairs and which assign all important tasks to officers and staff, thereby substituting executive members and staff for an active membership – but not all substitutionism is bureaucratic. For example, a militant local union president who preaches 'leave it to me' to members and attempts to squelch or take control of any initiative that does not emanate from himself is undoubtedly a barrier to workers' self-activity. However, his behaviour should only be considered bureaucratic if (or to the extent that) it involves the use of formal rules that limit workers' ability to determine their own goals and actions.¹¹

The conceptualization developed here can help us to understand how bureaucracy can pervade the practice of unionism. It is broad enough to cover a range of practices found in contemporary labour movements, including some phenomena excluded by the 'bureaucracy

11 My use of substitutionism is influenced by but not identical to that in Cliff (1960), which discusses it as a problem in the relationship between workers and a political party 'act[ing] as proxy in their name and on their behalf, regardless of what the workers thought or wanted.'

as officialdom' approach. For example, it alerts us to the fact that basic distinguishing features of how unions are politically administered by state power in Canada and the US – the legal and contractual prohibition of mid-contract strikes and sympathy strikes, and the requirement to resolve mid-contract disputes through grievance and arbitration procedures – are sources of union bureaucracy. These legal impositions take complaints about the employer out of the hands of unionized workers and channel them into a formal process. Once a grievance enters the process, it is 'owned' by union officials, not the workers affected. Another example of bureaucracy in the labour movement is when union rules sanction the monopolization of access to important information by a union executive or negotiating team. Members deprived of such information are less able to act independently. A union organizational structure that allows few or no opportunities for democratic decision-making by members during a strike is also an example of bureaucracy; even if the members have democratically set the goals of the strike, their inability to direct its course means that only a few people can determine how it is conducted. A union whose constitution gives members who hold no union office few or even no ways to participate in its affairs on an ongoing basis – for example, because general membership meetings are rare – is also bureaucratic. In such unions a few people conceive and execute union work, leaving most members with literally no way to get involved. When rules of order for the running of union meetings impede members' influence, this too is a case of bureaucracy. These examples, which are simply meant to give a sense of some of the ways that bureaucracy can be manifested within union organizations, suggest just how much is missed when a theory of union bureaucracy focuses solely or mainly on union full-time officers and staff.

THE SOCIAL ROOTS OF UNION BUREAUCRACY

What gives rise to union bureaucracy? It is arguably still true, as Alvin Gouldner (1955) claimed, that the root causes of bureaucracy are most often seen as human nature and the complexity and size of organizations such as unions (p.498-500). Even Darlington (2010), a Marxist, has written that 'a hierarchical and bureaucratic structure... is inherent in the requirement that unions are administratively efficient' (p.9). As Gouldner (1955) argues, such explanations, found in the work of theorists including Weber, Michels and Talcott Parsons, are shot through with 'pessimism and fatalism' (p. 498). A few years after Gouldner published his challenge to the dominant sociological theories of bureaucracy

of the day, Castoriadis responded to the claim that large organizations must inevitably be bureaucratic by arguing that the need to organize centralization in organizations is indeed an inevitable and objective problem. However, it is a problem that can be resolved either through bureaucracy or direct democracy. 'A general meeting of strikers, an elected strike committee, the commune, the soviet, the factory council – that's centralisation' (Castoriadis, 1988b, p.207) or, more precisely, these are anti-bureaucratic responses created by self-organized workers in struggle to the problem of centralization. Castoriadis's demonstration that there are alternatives to bureaucratic organization suggests that theories which deduce union bureaucracy as simply the inevitable outcome of organizational scale are flawed. Instead of adopting an empty fatalism, we need to explore the determinate social conditions out of which union bureaucracy arises.

Arguably the most important cause of union bureaucracy is the practice at the centre of unionism itself: negotiating the price of labour power. The subordination of wageearners to capital in the paid workplace sphere leads organized workers to seek to regulate aspects of their working lives through collective agreements with their employers. The unequal balance of power between capital and labour is the reason why workers tend to try to codify wage levels and conditions of work in contracts. Only when workers' collective power and willingness to confront employers is so strong that they find it unnecessary or even undesirable to fix wages or conditions will wage-earners not try to lock in such matters in contracts. The 'episodic and discontinuous character of working-class struggle under capitalism' (Post, 1999, p.122) means that circumstances in which wage-earners enjoy such a highly favourable relationship of forces are both uncommon and generally short-lived. These rare situations have given rise to unions that refuse to sign contracts, such as the Industrial Workers of the World in the early 20th century and some early locals of the Committee for Industrial Organisation/ Congress of Industrial Organisations (CIO).¹²

Once contracts are in place, employers, who are concerned with the uninterrupted production of goods and services, have strong incentives to insist that there be no strikes for the duration of the agreement. Similarly, they have an incentive to assert their control over how their employees work. Since it is rare for the balance of class power in the paid workplace sphere in capitalist societies to be decisively in workers' favour – after all, this is the fundamental reason why workers fight for collective agreements in the first place – unions face pressures to accept

12 See Brissenden (1957), p.115, 324, 330, 371; Lynd (1996), p.5.

limits on strikes and to recognize managerial authority. Such concessions arise directly out of the relations between capital and labour in the labour market and the labour process. When formalized, they are bureaucratic: they limit workers' ability to determine the character and goals of their activity. This, then, is the source of union bureaucracy at the very core of unionism, probably its most important source.

Although the rule-governed separation of intellectual from manual labour is an important source of bureaucracy in contemporary capitalist societies, above all in matters related to the natural sciences and society, it is not especially important in the case of union bureaucracy. If we follow Sohn-Rethel (1978) and understand intellectual labour as involving 'the use of non-empirical form-abstractions which may be represented by nothing other than non-empirical, 'pure' concepts' (p.66) – for example, abstract time, space and motion – then it is difficult to see them as important to unionism.

A far more important source of union bureaucracy is the separation of conception from execution. This is a key element of the alienation of labour – the structural lack of control by workers over the labour process, workplace organization and production in general – that is a hallmark of capitalist societies after their earliest phases (Rinehart, 2006). In societies in which the separation of conception from execution has become normalized, or even just common, it is little surprise that workers tend to organize unions in ways that bureaucratically reflect and reproduce this separation. Organizing in this way is consistent with how many aspects of their social lives are structured, including schooling, paid work, state-citizen relations and, often, voluntary associations. The separation between conception and execution can be seen in, for example, union rules that give enormous decision-making power to staff and elected officers, treating the membership as passive executants. This corresponds to how many employers treat employees, state officials treat citizens and religious authorities treat members of their congregations.

Nevertheless, it is also noteworthy that the tendency for workers to organize unions in ways that embody this dominant feature of capitalist society coexists with a countertendency: workers can and do organize in directly democratic ways. This democratic impulse arises out of experiences of workers' self-activity and self-organization, and disrupts the separation between conception and execution. It can be observed most clearly in the most democratic contemporary unions, such as the fledgling National Union of Healthcare Workers in the US (Early, 2011); the unions affiliated with France's Union syndicale Solidaires federation

(Coupé, 2007); and in forms of collective action such as strikes in which workers make important decisions in mass meetings and elect recallable strike committees.¹³ Many unions bear, to some extent, the imprint of both this democratic countertendency and the tendency to reproduce the separation of conception from execution. The relative strength of the two in a particular case is the product of a concrete history.

Capitalist state power is also a significant root of union bureaucracy. States often impose formal rules that influence the social organization of unions. Such rules are examples of what Mark Neocleous (1996) dubs political administration, his term for the legal and administrative activity of capitalist state power in civil society. Political administration constitutes legal persons as both subjects of rights and objects of administration and regulates the working class through mechanisms that respond to workers' struggles but in ways that aim to extinguish their subversive potential (p. 88-92, 110-116). It is very common for capitalist states, once they legally recognize unions, to use their legal and regulatory powers to compel unions to structure themselves in ways that limit members' ability to determine the goals and methods of action. Bans on strikes or restrictions on the timing and nature of strikes are perhaps the most frequently imposed restrictions. In the US, the 'gradual metamorphosis of grievance arbitration from a voluntary and private mode of dispute resolution into a semicompulsory, institutional system for the management of complex enterprises' (Klare, 1978, p.377) was driven in large part by a series of judicial decisions, and the Taft-Hartley Act of 1947 imposed important restrictions on strike action (Green, 1980, p.198). In Canada, legislation passed in the 1940s prohibited all strikes during the term of a contract and made grievance arbitration compulsory (Fudge and Tucker, 2001). However, we should not forget that bureaucratic rules concerning such matters need not be imposed by state power, since they also arise from within capital-labour relations in the labour process and the labour market, as argued above. For example, in the US the initial 1937 contract between General Motors and the United Auto Workers 'established a grievance procedure designed to circumvent the shop steward systems and prevent wildcat strikes' and the 1940 contract stipulated that the grievance procedure would be the only way that the union would challenge management actions (Edsforth, 1987, p.177, 193). The new bureaucratic state mechanisms for the political administration of labour that were instituted in Canada in the 1940s amplified and generalized developments such as management rights clauses and grievance procedures

13 For example, the wildcat construction strikes in Britain in February 2009 (Gall, 2010).

that had already begun to emerge in collective bargaining (while also drawing on the US Wagner Act model of industrial legality and elements of pre-war Canadian legislation) (Camfield, 2002, p. 318).

Having argued that fatalist theories which simply deduce union bureaucracy from the existence of large-scale organisation are unconvincing, this article has discussed three social roots of union bureaucracy: contracts arising out of the wage relation, the separation of conception from execution and the political administration of unions by capitalist state power. It is now time to return to our starting point, the union officialdom. In addition to being a fourth source of union bureaucracy, it deserves some examination as a specific phenomenon.

WHAT ABOUT THE OFFICIALDOM?

So far this alternative account of union bureaucracy has said almost nothing about union officials. Some readers may be inclined to think that this is a theory of bureaucracy that gives bureaucrats an alibi. My concern, however, has simply been to foreground what is so often neglected or ignored in discussions of 'the trade union bureaucracy,' namely bureaucracy as a form of social relations. To use an imperfect analogy, this is no more an alibi for union officials than Marx's theory of the capitalist mode of production is an alibi for capitalists. The more bureaucratic a union is, the more bureaucratic its officialdom. But we should be more careful about making sweeping generalizations about union officialdoms than some radical theorists have been.

That said, there is plenty of historical evidence that as collective bargaining relations become more established, giving rise to or strengthening union bureaucracy as discussed above, unions tend to acquire (more) full-time officers and staff. Three examples will illustrate the pattern. As local contracts between craft unions and employers spread in the US and Canada at the end of the nineteenth century these unions began to hire full-time 'business agents' to administer their contracts. As Craig Heron (1996) puts it, these staff, along with the top officers and organisers of the craft unions, developed into an officialdom which began to develop a concern with protecting the union organization, its assets, its procedures, and its contractual obligations, as well as their own status and salaries. By denying access to central strike funds or ordering strikers back to work, these full-time officials sometimes put brakes on workers' anger and resentment (p.32).¹⁴

14 See also Heron (1999) and Green (1980, p.35-40).

Half a century later, the stabilization in the US and Canada of collective bargaining between employers and industrial unions that had recently become more bureaucratic also brought with it an expansion of union officialdom; the need to process grievances within the new mandatory grievance and arbitration systems was an important reason for this growth (Heron, 1996, p.80; Green, 1980, p.187). In South Africa, after the passage of the 1995 Labour Relations Act, which established a new mode of industrial legality, the officialdom of the Congress of South African Trade Unions swelled with the development of a layer of full-time shop stewards (Appolis and Sikwebu, 2003).

Many more similar cases could be cited.

The development of an extensive union officialdom is significant for a union movement. Regardless of their ideological outlooks or personal commitments, full-time officials (whether officers or union staff) have material conditions that are objectively different from those of the members they are supposed to serve.¹⁵ They do not share workers' working conditions. They are often more highly-paid than rank-and-file members and lay officials. Full-time officials are only indirectly affected by employer attacks on wages and working conditions. Full-time officials who deal with management on a regular basis are particularly subject to employer efforts to enlist them in efforts to limit work stoppages, get workers to accept managerial control on the job, motivate workers to work harder, and the like. These material conditions create a real tendency for full-time officials to be less sensitive to the realities of workers' lives on the job and more attuned to management's desires than are rank-and-file workers. This is true even when a union is an insecure organization with very few full-time officials and meagre funds.

To the degree that serving as a full-time official actually becomes an occupation rather than a temporary commitment, this existence cultivates a different outlook. As the Welsh radical pamphlet *The Miners' Next Step* observes, full-time officers become "'trade unionists by trade" and their profession demands certain privileges' (Anonymous, 1912, p.3), or at least tends to. For full-time officials who can contemplate remaining full-timers for years, the union 'constitutes...a whole way of life – their day to day function, formative social relationships with peers and superiors on the organisational ladder, a potential career, and, on many occasions, a social meaning, a *raison d'être*.' Preserving this existence imposes its own imperatives:

15 This is also true for part-time officers (and other union members who are allowed time away from work for union activity), though obviously to a much lesser extent.

To maintain themselves as they are, the whole layer of officials must, first and above all, maintain their organizations. It is thus easy to understand how an irresistible tendency emerges on the part of the trade union officials... to treat their organizations as ends in themselves, rather than as the means to defend their memberships – to come to conflate the interests of the organizations upon which they depend with the interests of those they ostensibly represent (Brenner, 1985, p.45).

The material need to preserve the union in order to continue as a full-time official, which gives rise to the tendency to treat the union institution as an end in itself, is just as significant for a radical who takes office because of a sincere desire to further the fight for workers' rights as it is for someone who becomes a full-timer as a way to boost their income and status and escape from highly alienated labour.

An individual official may, of course, remain personally more committed to the workers she serves than to defending the union as an institution. The case of National Union of Mineworkers' leader Arthur Scargill in the 1984-1985 miners' strike in Britain springs to mind.¹⁶ Brenner's point is not that all full-time officials are always more concerned with the institutional fate of unions than they are with workers' interests. Rather, it is that the officialdom as a whole cannot reproduce itself without preserving union institutions. There is more than one way to do this. An orientation to preserving union institutions is often accompanied with overtly class-collaborationist ideology, but need not be. It does not necessarily translate into a refusal by full-time officials to mobilize workers in struggles that defy the law to some extent – consider the political strikes organized by leaders of the Canadian Auto Workers (CAW) and most public sector unions during the Days of Action in province of Ontario in the second half of the 1990s (Camfield, 2000) and the efforts by leaders of the British Columbia division of CUPE to organize sympathy strikes to support striking teachers in 2005 (Camfield, 2009). The central issue is that when union officialdoms become consolidated social layers their continued existence depends on the security of union institutions. Consequently, the actions of full-time officials as a group will be influenced – and, in the last instance, determined by – the goal of preserving these institutions.

This allows us to pinpoint why union officialdom as a social layer is a fourth source of union bureaucracy. Motivated by the need to preserve union institutions in order to reproduce themselves as an officialdom,

16 See Callinicos and Simons (1985), which combines an appreciation of Scargill's strengths with observations about his political weaknesses.

full-time officials tend to organize union activity in ways that reflect their distinct interests as a group. Officials tend to favour ways of functioning that give themselves a great deal of decision-making power, at the expense of democratic rank-and-file control. As *The Miners' Next Step* puts it, of the privileges demanded by "'trade unionists by trade"...the greatest of all these are plenary powers...every inroad the rank and file make on this privilege lessens the power and prestige' (Anonymous, 1912, p.3-4) of full-time officials, who for this reason have an interest in opposing such democratizing moves. In short, full-time officials tend to organize union activity in ways that enhance their own sway. These are bureaucratic when they involve formal rules that limit the ability of members to determine the methods and goals of union action. This is a general tendency of the behaviour of full-time officials where union officialdom has become consolidated as a social layer; obviously there are individual exceptions.

When this kind of practice does arise, it can be challenged by the influence of active members firmly committed to democratic methods designed to limit the power of full-timers, such as the radical Welsh workers who a century ago proposed *The Miners' Next Step*. There are undoubtedly full-time officials who are so deeply committed to membership control that they seek to develop rather than curtail it. Nevertheless, full-time officials do generally tend to promote bureaucratic functioning rooted in their distinct interests as a social layer.

Contrary to a common assumption, the sway of the officialdom is not always exercised against militancy or radicalism. Full-time officials may try to advance one or both within unions within a bureaucratic framework. This can be seen, for example, in the militancy of the Justice for Janitors campaign initiated by leaders of the Service Employees International Union (Tait, 2005, p.188-189, 200-202) and the CAW's left turn in the second half of the 1990s.¹⁷ However, as a theoretical generalization, we can say that once a union officialdom has crystallized as a social layer it will tend to display institutional conservatism. The strength of this conservatism varies enormously, and is influenced by a range of factors including the extent of union bureaucratization, the degree of unions' institutional security, the intensity of class struggle and the ideology of the union in question. The conservatism of union officials is not found only in stable contemporary unions in advanced capitalist countries; it

17 This turn and the CAW's subsequent evolution have not yet received adequate study, but see Gindin (1995) and Allen (2006). Recognizing the possibility of bureaucratic militancy implies a questioning of the notion (present in Voss and Sherman [2000]) that militant mobilization is evidence of a challenge to bureaucratic unionism.

has manifested itself in *far* more fragile and less bureaucratic organizations. For example, late nineteenth-century US and Canadian craft unions had weak legal rights, few officials and small bank accounts. Yet, as discussed above, their full-time officials were increasingly preoccupied with the defence of union institutions as well as contract obligations and their own perks. In addition to noting the tendency to a conservatism based on the preservation of union institutions, we can also conclude that full-time officials tend to favour their own control within union organizations, thereby promoting bureaucracy.

ANALYZING UNIONS TODAY

Where does this theory direct our attention in the analysis of unions? First, by highlighting the importance of formal rules that limit workers' ability to determine the character and goals of their actions and which they themselves are not easily able to change, this approach directs our attention to the *double-sided nature of collective agreements and labour law*. Both are often sources of union rights as well as restrictions on collective action.

For example, many basic features of US and Canadian labour law qualify as bureaucratic. In the US, the law prohibits sympathy ('secondary') strikes (Lynd and Gross, 2008). It also bans 'bargaining over managerial decisions "which lie at the core of entrepreneurial control"' and makes grievance arbitration 'semicompulsory' (Klare, 1978, p.337). Canadian law goes even further in its imposition of bureaucracy. It makes labour board certification the only permissible route to union recognition, bans recognition strikes, requires grievance arbitration procedures and (in most jurisdictions) a pre-strike compulsory conciliation process, contains a blanket prohibition of mid-contract, political and sympathy strikes, makes management rights clauses in contracts mandatory and requires the Rand Formula for union security (Fudge and Tucker, 2001, p.302-315). Such instances of bureaucracy are widely accepted by unionists, precisely because they are mandated by law. As Philip Corrigan and Derek Sayer (1981) have argued, 'Integral to the law is a moral topography, a mapping of the social world which normalises its preferred contours – and, equally importantly, suppresses or at best marginalises other ways of seeing and being' (p.33) and, I would add, doing. Although many instances of bureaucracy stemming from law and contract have the straightforward effect of making it difficult for workers to engage in collective action against employers and governments, some – such as exclusive representation rights and the Rand

Formula's requirement that all workers covered by a union contract pay union dues – have effects on workers' power that are more complicated.

Second, this theoretical perspective underscores the significance of others kinds of formal rules restricting the activity of unionized workers, chiefly those found in *union constitutions* and other union rules. In both the US and Canada, bureaucracy is widespread in the form of organizational structures and practices at all levels – from locals all the way up to the top labour centrals – that make it difficult or impossible for unionized workers to determine what their organizations will do and how they will do it. In these countries, this kind of bureaucracy is not the result of the political administration of labour by state power. US laws in fact guarantee many union members a number of basic democratic rights (Benson, 1979) while Canadian law and administration impose very few requirements on the internal organization of unions (Lynk, 2002). Much more significant as an influence on union organizational structures in the US and Canada is the pervasiveness of the separation of conception from execution in social life. The working-class movement is affected by the norms of societies in which organizations are generally understood to be properly run by small numbers of managers and 'experts,' with little or no popular participation. This approach has been unchallenged in the most influential political traditions within US and Canadian unions. What Heron (1996) writes of the politics of Canadian union officials in the years after the Second World War was also true of the outlook of many of their US counterparts (Mills, 2001): they 'had always emphasized the importance of expertise and centralized bureaucratic administration, rather than direct rank-and-file initiative' (p.80). Following the legal entrenchment of unions and collective bargaining in the US in the 1930s and in Canada in the following decade, newly-consolidated labour officialdoms put a stronger bureaucratic stamp on union organization.

The perspective advanced in this article broadens our understanding of what union bureaucracy is. Bureaucracy is not a group of leaders. Nor is it an external cage in which unions are trapped. Rather, as a mode of existence of social relations, it is, to varying degrees, a significant quality of unionism itself – to be precise, of particular forms of union praxis in specific times and places. Where union bureaucracy exists, it is usually deeply internal to unions as working-class movement organizations. For this reason, 'revolutionary radicalism' at union meetings and conferences and the denunciation of bureaucrats offer no escape from bureaucracy, which can only be

weakened through the promotion of forms of action whose character and goals are determined by workers themselves. Self-activity, self-organization and democratic control from below are central to anti-bureaucratic unionism, in which the conception and execution of union activity are brought together through workers' active participation in and control over their organisations. Conditions which are conducive to this kind of unionism and practices that foster its development deserve study.

REFERENCES

- Allen, B. (2006). Inside the CAW jacket. *New Socialist*, 57, 18-20
- Anonymous (1912). *The miners' next step. Being a suggested scheme for the reorganisation of the Federation*. Tonyandy: Unofficial Reform Committee. Retrieved from <http://www.llgc.org.uk/ymgyrchu/Llafur/1926/MNS.pdf>
- Appolis, J. & Sikwebu, D. (2003). Pressing challenges facing the South African labour movement: an interview with John Appolis and Dinga Sikwebu. In T. Bramble & F. Barchiesi (Eds.), *Rethinking the labour movement in the 'New South Africa.'* (p. 205-225). Aldershot: Ashgate.
- Barker, C. (2001). Robert Michels and the 'cruel game.' In C. Barker, A. Johnson & M. Lavalette (Eds.), *Leadership and social movements* (p. 24-43). Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Benson, H. (1979). *Democratic rights for union members*. New York: Association for Union Democracy.
- Braverman, H. (1998). *Labor and monopoly capital*. New York: Monthly Review.
- Brenner, R. (1985). The paradox of social democracy: The American case. In M. Davis, F. Pfeil & M. Sprinker (Eds.), *The year left: An American socialist yearbook* (p. 32-86). London: Verso.
- Brissenden, P.F. (1957). *The IWW: A study of American syndicalism*. 2nd ed. New York: Russell and Russell.
- Callinicos, A. (1995). *Socialists in the trade unions*. London: Bookmarks.
- Callinicos, A. & Simons, M. (1985). The Great Strike: the miners' strike of 1984-5 and its lessons. London: Socialist Worker.
- Camfield, D. (2000). Assessing resistance in Harris's Ontario, 1995-1999. In M. Burke, C. Mooers & J. Shields (Eds), *Restructuring and resistance: Canadian public policy in an age of global capitalism* (p. 306-317). Halifax: Fernwood.
- — — (2002). *Class, politics and social change: the remaking of the working class in 1940s Canada*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, York University, Toronto.

- — — (2009). Sympathy for the teacher: labour law and transgressive workers' collective action in British Columbia, 2005. *Capital and Class*, 33 (3), 81-107.
- Castoriadis, C. (1988a). Modern capitalism and revolution. In D.A. Curtis (Ed.), *Political and social writings* (Vol. 2, p. 225-315). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- — — (1988b). Proletariat and organization, I. In D.A. Curtis (Ed.), *Political and social writings* (Vol. 2, p. 193-222). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- — — (1993). Recommencing the revolution. In D.A. Curtis (Ed.), *Political and social writings* (Vol. 3, p. 27-55). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Cliff, T. (1960). Trotsky on substitutionism. Retrieved from <http://www.marxists.org/archive/cliff/works/1960/xx/trosub.htm>
- Corrigan, P. & Sayer, D. (1981) How the law rules: variations on some themes in Karl Marx. In B. Fryer, A. Hunt, D. McBarnet & B. Moorhouse (Eds.), *Law, state and society* (p. 21-53). London: Croom Helm.
- Coupé, A. (Ed.). (2007). *Qu'est-ce que l'Union syndicale Solidaires?* Paris: Editions de l'Archipel. Retrieved from http://solidaires.org/IMG/pdf/Union_syndicale_solidaires.pdf
- Darlington, R. (2010). The rank-and-file versus bureaucracy analysis of intra-union relations. Unpublished paper presented at the European Social Science History Conference, Ghent.
- Darlington, R. & Upchurch, M. (2012). A reappraisal of the rank-and-file versus bureaucracy debate. *Capital and Class*, 36 (1), 77-95.
- Early, S. (2011). *The civil wars in US labor: Birth of a new workers' movement or death throes of the old?* Chicago: Haymarket.
- Edsforth, R. (1987). *Class conflict and cultural consensus: The making of a mass consumer society in Flint, Michigan*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.
- Edwards, R. (1979). *Contested terrain: The transformation of the workplace in the twentieth century*. New York: Basic Books.
- Fudge, J. & Tucker, E. (2001). *Labour before the law: The regulation of workers' collective action in Canada, 1900-1948*. Don Mills: Oxford University Press.
- Gall, G. (2010, February 10). The engineering construction workers' strike. *New Socialist Webzine*. Retrieved from <http://www.newsocialist.org>
- Gindin, S. (1995). *The Canadian Auto Workers: The birth and transformation of a union*. Toronto: James Lorimer.
- Goody, J. (2006). *The theft of history*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- Gouldner, A. (1955). Metaphysical pathos and the theory of bureaucracy. *American Political Science Review*, 49, 496-507.
- Graeber, D. (2006). Beyond power/knowledge: an exploration of the relation of power, ignorance and stupidity. Retrieved from <http://www.lse.ac.uk/collections/LSEPublicLecturesAndEvents/pdf/20060525Graeber.pdf>
- Green, J. (1980). *The world of the worker: Labor in twentieth-century America*. New York: Hill and Wang.
- Heron, C. (1996). *The Canadian labour movement: A short history*. Toronto: James Lorimer.
- Heron, C. (1999). Review of the book *Red flags and red tape: The making of a labour bureaucracy*, by M. Leier. *Labor History*, 40, 410-412.
- Hyman, R. (1989). *The political economy of industrial relations: Theory and practice in a cold climate*. Basingstoke: Macmillan.
- Hyman, R. (2012). Will the real Richard Hyman please stand up? *Capital and Class*, 36 (1), 151-164.
- Kapferer, N. (1980). Commodity, science and technology: A critique of Sohn-Rethel. In P. Slater (Ed.), *Outlines of a critique of technology* (p. 74-95). London: Ink Links.
- Kelly, J. (1988). *Trade unions and socialist politics*. London: Verso.
- Klare, K.E. (1978). Judicial deradicalization of the Wagner Act and the origins of modern legal consciousness, 1937-1941. *Minnesota Law Review*, 62, 265-339.
- Leier, M. (1991). Which side are they on? Some suggestions for the labour bureaucracy debate. *International Review of Social History*, 36, 412-427.
- Lenin, V.I. (1920). Preface to the French and German editions. *Imperialism, the highest stage of capitalism*. Retrieved from www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1916/imphsc/pref02.htm
- Lukács, G. (1971). *History and class consciousness: Studies in Marxist dialectics*. London: Merlin
- Lynd, S. (1996). Introduction. In S. Lynd (Ed.), *'We are all leaders': The alternative unionism of the early 1930s* (p. 1-26). Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- Lynd, S. & Gross, D. (2008). *Labor law for the rank and filer: Building solidarity while staying clear of the law*. Oakland: PM Press.
- Lynk, M. (2002). Union democracy and the law in Canada. *Just Labour*, 1, 16-30.
- Mandel, E. (1992). *Power and money: A Marxist theory of bureaucracy*. London: Verso.
- Michels, R. (1966). *Political parties: A sociological study of the oligarchical tendencies of modern democracy*. New York: The Free Press.

- Mills, C.W. (2001). *The new men of power: America's labor leaders*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- Neocleous, M. (1996). *Administering civil society: Towards a theory of state power*. London and New York: Macmillan and St. Martin's.
- Perusek, G. (1995). Classical political sociology and union behavior. In G. Perusek & K. Worcester (Eds), *Trade union politics: American unions and economic change, 1960s-1990s* (p. 57-76). New Jersey: Humanities.
- Post, C. (1999). Ernest Mandel and the Marxian theory of bureaucracy. In G. Achcar (Ed.), *The Legacy of Ernest Mandel* (p. 119-151). Verso: London.
- Post, C. (2011). Exploring working-class consciousness: A critique of the theory of the 'labour aristocracy.' *Historical Materialism*, 18 (4), 3-38.
- Rinehart, J. (2006). *The tyranny of work: Alienation and the labour process*. 5th ed. Toronto: Thomson/Nelson.
- Schmidt, J. (2000). *Disciplined minds: A critical look at salaried professionals and the soul-battering system that shapes their lives*. Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield.
- Seaford, R. (2012). Monetisation and the genesis of the Western subject. *Historical Materialism*, 20 (1), 78-102.
- Sohn-Rethel, A. (1978). *Intellectual and manual labour: A critique of epistemology*. Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities.
- Tait, V. (2005). *Poor workers' unions: Rebuilding labor from below*. Cambridge, MA: South End.
- Thompson, P. (1989). *The nature of work: An introduction to debates on the labour process*. 2nd ed. Houndmills: Macmillan.
- Voss, K. & Sherman, R. (2000). Breaking the iron law of oligarchy: union revitalization in the American labor movement. *American Journal of Sociology*, 106 (2), 303-349.
- Weber, M. (1952). The essentials of bureaucratic organization: an ideal-type construction. In R.K. Merton (Ed.), *Reader in bureaucracy* (p. 18-27). Glencoe: The Free Press.

