

The Agony of Union Democracy

How union politics are different from electoral politics.



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Tell your union. (Photo: Getty)

This week, Akela Lacy at The Intercept [reported on](#) the excruciating internal civil war going on inside the New York Legal Aid Society, which provides public defenders to the city's neediest defendants. The lawyers there, who are [unionized](#) with the UAW, decided to vote on a [resolution](#) from their union expressing solidarity with trade unions in Palestine, and speaking out on behalf of the people of Palestine, and endorsing the BDS movement. In response to this union action, the CEO of the Legal Aid Society called a meeting and told the union members that the resolution was antisemitic and that it would hurt the organization's ability to fundraise. Then, some attorneys at the Legal Aid Society filed a lawsuit(!) to stop the union from counting the

votes on the resolution, and a judge granted a restraining order(!) that halted the vote and prevented the resolution from moving forward.

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And you thought *your* union had assholes in it, eh? This little flare-up of, discussion actually holds within it the kernel of a valuable lesson about ur before I get to that, I must preface it with a few basic points:

1. This is a good resolution. I hope that the members of the union voted humanitarian issue. By passing resolutions like these, smaller local u to their parent unions and to the leadership of the national labor mov issue of concern to members, and they want to see action. This signa valuable in pushing organized labor to take a stance [against war](#). Thi snide question, “What do you think your little statement will accomp some instrumental value.
2. I generally don’t like to weigh in on legal issues because I stand a good chance of being “wrong” (a legal term). But I am pretty sure based on years of labor reporting that a judge telling a union that it cannot count the votes on an internal resolution does not, you know, accord with the law, and once this thing is litigated to the end of its rope the union will win. Some actual lawyers [share](#) this opinion, for what it’s worth, although of course everyone involved in this thing is a lawyer, which is a good reminder that the law is fake and only power is real.
3. Do not file a lawsuit against your own union seeking to prevent it to count the votes on a resolution you don’t like. What the fuck is wrong with you.

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Rather than just sitting here and gaping in awe at how big of a prick you would have to be to file such a lawsuit, though, let's instead sit here and muse for a moment about the nature of unions. Many or most people's frame for enacting political power is: electoral politics. That frame does not quite map onto unions. The best and worst feature of a union is that it includes *everyone*. Whereas a political party is self-selecting group of people who ostensibly agree on at least a very general set of principles, a union is a fully inclusive group of everyone in a workplace. The members of a single union may have wildly different opinions on politics and everything else. This is a great thing, because unions are one of the only institutions in America that pull in genuinely diverse groups like this and make them work together for common cause—this is what make unions little schools of true democracy, wonderful mechanisms for teaching people what democracy in action can look like. On the downside, it can make it very hard, at times, to wield power. If you have a 51% majority in the United States Congress, you can pass laws and implement your entire agenda and allocate billions of dollars and shape the entire nation in your image. If you have a 51% majority in a union, you just have: a divided union.

Unions *can* be run as pure bare-knuckled cutthroat winner-take-all power grab operations, like electoral politics are, but that is not the way that we *want* unions to be run. We want unions to be democratic. Of course you must always strike some wise functional balance between “every member voting on everything” and “a dictatorship,” but in general you want the actions of unions to reflect the will of the membership. This is why, for example, one of the baseline fights that union reformers often wage is to win “one member, one vote” structures that allow members to democratically elect their leaders, rather than having weird little closed Electoral College-style “delegate” systems that allow insiders to tightly control everything. We believe that is not fair because unions should be democracies run according to the will of the membership. Furthermore, the legitimacy and the power of unions both depend on this buy-in from the members. It is why, when unions take strike authorization votes, unions are not looking for 51% approval; they are looking for more like 90%+ approval. Such powerful actions only work if they are propelled by the true will of the membership. That is what makes them strong. (This is also why I always roll my eyes at political endorsements from unions that [do not come](#) from any sort of member vote. They try to steal the weight of saying “this million-member union endorses X” without any real input from the million members in question. You can't have it both ways.)

In electoral politics, “I will destroy my opponents and fertilize the earth with their bones” is a fine approach. In internal union politics, though, it doesn't work. Why? Because your opponents are your fellow union members. Damn. For one thing, if you destroy them all, you have probably weakened the union as a whole. And for another thing, the asshole union members who are opposing you on whatever internal battle you're waging are, in the big picture, the same union members that your union is obligated to serve. It's so annoying!!! But it's a fact. No matter how

much you may want to crush and obliterate your opponents in the union, doing so is not, strictly speaking, in line with the ideals of unionism that we are trying to promote out here.

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This why many issues in electoral politics that would be dealt with simply by applying power require a different approach inside unions. They require organizing—talking with and listening to and negotiating with and painstakingly trying to convince your idiot opponents, rather than trying to bulldoze them. Organizing is a very distinct skill, and great organizers are very valuable people. I am not one of them. But being involved in unions has at least made me consider the virtues of taking the organizing approach to problems rather than defaulting to the “try to smash you” approach to problems. This is another reason why the growth of unions could change American society as a whole for the better, though I admit that it can be incredibly annoying in practice if you are not a very patient person.

All this is to say: Sometimes you can't get your union to take a stance on something because your union is not united on it. And that's the price of being a democratic union. I have been, sometimes, on the winning side of fierce disputes inside a union, and, more often, on the losing side. What can you do? You just keep going. You keep trying to get your beloved fellow union members that you sometimes want to scream at to see the wisdom of your own position. You have to reach some level of supermajority support (either from the membership or from a legitimately democratic elected representative body) for a statement of a union to really mean anything. Then, when the union speaks, people know that they must listen, because the voice of the union carries the *weight* of the many members it represents. It's not some sleazy Congressman's little political trick. It is the true voice of the people, and it is powerful.

Sometimes your union will break your heart. That's okay. Being in a union is still better than the alternative. And if the people in your union don't want to Free Palestine, there are a million other people in the streets that do.

Also

- You can find tools and information to help support a ceasefire in Gaza [here](#).

- If you liked reading this short piece about unions, you know what I bet you would like even more? A whole book about it (with reporting! All over the country! Heroic workers! Internal union struggles! Wow!) My book about the labor movement, “The Hammer,” will be published on February 13, and [you can preorder it here](#), or wherever books are sold.
- Thank you to the many thousands of you who have subscribed to How Things Work. I was thinking the other day about how I used to listen to NPR, and then they would ask for money, and I would never donate, because I assumed other people would. This publication is subject to this same dynamic, except it does not have hundreds of millions of dollars in the bank like NPR does. Paid subscribers enable this place to exist, but only about ten percent of subscribers are paid. Would **you** like to be one of these elite heroes, who help How Things Work exist and remain free for everyone? If so, please become a paid subscriber now. It feels great.

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Henry Strozier Nov 19 ♥ Liked by Hamilton Nolan

Nolan is right on the money, and why supporting and wanting to aid a bunch of people who are being bombed out of existence is anti-semitic is beyond me. Most Israelis want to get rid of Netanyahu--does this make them anti-semitic to be against the maiming and killing of children and innocent adults? No it does not! As a Union member for many years, I'm ashamed of this particular Union crisis.

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Ian Nov 19 ♥ Liked by Hamilton Nolan

I left my union recently because it took on the bad structures of electoral politics.

Any actions or statements went through an Executive Committee. The EC deliberates on its own schedule, and members were not invited to those deliberations. Those bringing proposals were not allowed to participate in deliberation unless invited, and we only received the up-or-down vote.

In some cases, issues were not decided in a timely fashion because the EC did not meet or took up new issues. The union squandered opportunities and goodwill among members because of the

hierarchical structure.

I left because our union's lack of transparency, unresponsive hierarchy, and absence of reform mechanisms meant improving the union was the same struggle as improving the workplace overall. I might be wrong in what unions should look like, but a union that resembles the company is probably not a good union.

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2 replies by Hamilton Nolan and others

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