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Why Consensus Decision-making Won't Work for Grassroots Unionism

Tom Wetzel

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Syndicalists have always supported a form of direct democracy based on majority rule. Like most American unions, the Industrial Workers of the World officially endorses Robert's Rules of Order — although some of their smaller branches use a stripped down version called Rusty's Rules.¹ The point to taking a vote is that it enables an organized group to come to a decision that expresses the collective will, even when there is some disagreement.

This doesn't mean that all decisions are made by voting. In grassroots organizations based on majority decision-making, it often happens that most decisions are made without taking any vote — especially in smaller meetings. That's because people are often able to come to agreement just by discussing the issue or proposal.

¹ See <http://www.iww.org/oldbranches/US/CA/lagmb/lit/meeting.pdf>.

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As a mass organization, a union will inevitably tend to have a diversity of viewpoints. On the other hand, the ability to reach agreement is helped by the shared circumstances. The members of a base union — such as a grassroots union in a particular workplace — are working class people who share common subordination to a particular employer, or they work in the same industry. Although different jobs or departments may have special problems, and some groups may experience particular forms of discrimination, they share the general conditions of that workplace. Many will have personal connections with other members from working together. This makes it easier for members to take up the form of “we” consciousness involved in making collective decisions in a union.

Nowadays many radical activists object to making decisions by majority vote and advocate “consensus decision-making” as an alternative. Consensus decision-making among activist groups in the USA is relatively recent. This practice originated with the anti-nuke movement and women’s consciousness raising groups between the ‘60s and ‘80s. The Quakers were the original source or influence for consensus decision-making in that era. Quaker groups like Movement for a New Society and the American Friends Service Committee (the social service arm of the Quaker religious groups) were important advocates for consensus back then. Later on this practice was continued by anti-war groups like Direct Action to Stop the War during the opposition to the Iraq war in 2003. The most important recent experiment with consensus was with Occupy Wall Street and the various Occupy assemblies in American cities.

During this period, “these [consensus] methods became identified with anarchism,” David Graeber writes, “because anarchists recognized them to be forms that could be employed in a free society, in which no one could be physically coerced to go along with a decision they found profoundly objectionable.” (David Graeber, *The Democracy Project: A*

History, A Crisis, A Movement, (Random House: New York, 2013), 195.) Actually, this is a very egoistic form of anarchism, as I'll show in a moment.

Consensus and grassroots majority vote democracy share certain common features, such as open discussion, trying to reach agreement through talking things out, trying to persuade each other. Although meetings of a union or other working class organization don't have the problem of the huge clash of interests between people of different classes, it's very likely that people will have disagreements on important issues.

Consensus is based on the idea of talking things out until agreement is reached. In the form of consensus practiced in the '70s and '80s, no agreement could be reached unless people were unanimous. This tended to lead to very protracted meetings. Six hour meetings were not unusual. Occupy Wall Street adopted a 90 percent rule, but this still allows a concerted minority to force concessions to their viewpoint. This is a form of minority rule.

I think it is possible for consensus to work fine in some settings, such as small groups of people with similar ideas. Often voting is used as a method in bureaucratic organizations such as the U.S. Congress or meetings of unions dominated by officials and paid staff. On the other hand, decision-making may be a lot less alienating in a small circle of like-minded acquaintances who simply talk things out to reach agreement. But this contrast is misleading because a working class social movement must be able to do effective decision-making in mass settings where consensus isn't workable.

Consensus originally derives from the way Quaker religious meetings are conducted. The Quaker method of prayer is a process of "waiting upon the Lord" to reveal "the Light" within. George Fox, founder of the Society of Friends (Quakers), wrote: "In the Light wait where the Unity is, where the peace is, where the Oneness with the Father and Son is, where there is no Rent nor Division." (Quoted in Howard

Ryan, “Blocking Progress: Consensus Decision Making in the Anti-Nuclear Movement” (<http://www.docspopuli.org/pdfs/consensus.pdf>.) Quakers reject voting because it presupposes “division.” Quaker groups are based on a high level of unity. This makes it easier to reach a consensus. When people make a statement in a meeting, often there are silences. There is not a hurry to make a decision.

Quaker religious societies are an example of what John McDermott calls an *expressive* organization. As McDermott put it:

Unity of action is not required...The only unity required ahead of time for expressive organizations is a general will to share, to discuss, and to enter into the company of others for mutual growth, support, and enjoyment. (John McDermott, *The Crisis in the Working Class & Some Arguments For a New Labor Movement* (South End Press: Boston, 1980), 190.)

An expressive organization’s purpose is “to express certain things which already exist among its members.” With an expressive organization much of the purpose is in the meeting itself — as with the singing and praying in a church service. Religious groups are not the only kind of expressive organization.

As McDermott points out, the capitalist elite also have their own “expressive” organizations, such as seminars, conferences, magazines, and so on. In the past the radical left has organized grassroots institutions that played an expressive role in working class communities. An example would be the Hall of the Masses in Detroit after World War 1. This was not a union or instrumental organization. It was a place where workers who were being radicalized could come to hear talks and debates. Issues of importance to the working class were analyzed, and cultural events were held.

Consensus is based on the principle of the primacy of the individual Ego over the collective will. This is why I say that consensus is based on an egoistic principle.

Requirements for unanimity or super-majorities for decisions are not helpful if the aim is building social power among working class people.

To gain some power, unions try to mobilize resistance, which can take small forms like wearing T-shirts with a message or a stronger form such as a strike. Often a strike comes only after a lengthy period of discussion among workers, meetings, growing anger, and efforts by a union to build confidence. People may fear losing their job. When workers are discussing whether to strike, there will be some who are more timid or more cautious. It may take a major effort to convince even a majority to strike. If a decision to strike were to require complete unanimity or a high super-majority, this would make it much more difficult to get a strike off the ground.

Prior to the 2012 strike by Chicago teachers, the state legislature in Illinois passed a law requiring a “Yes” vote of 75 percent plus one for a teacher strike to be legal. This was a 75 percent majority of all teachers, not just those voting. This was done to make it difficult for teachers to strike legally.

During the height of Occupy in 2011, people describing their experiences often spoke about how personally helpful it was to find others experiencing similar circumstances, such as unemployment, foreclosure, massive student debt, and so on. The assemblies could provide a sympathetic hearing to those talking about their life. And hearing others validated their own dissent from the system. Looking at it this way, we can say that Occupy assemblies also had an expressive character. Marina Sitrin’s report on a series of interviews with Occupy veterans also suggests this expressive character: “We would often interject how important the question of dignity is....People around the US often no longer feel it is their fault that they are losing their homes or jobs — and instead feel a new sense of power — feeling they are the 99%.” (<https://zcomm.org/znetarticle/sustainability-organization-and-anti-capitalism-talkin-occupy-around-the-us/>)

McDermott distinguishes expressive organizations from *instrumental* organizations — organizations we form to be a vehicle for accomplishing our aims. Unions and other organizations of struggle (such as tenant or environmental justice organizations) are instrumental organizations.

Although consensus is workable in some situations, I think consensus is not a viable decision-making method for unions or working class-based mass organizations of struggle.

Working class people in the USA tend to work long hours. Since the ‘70s the workweek has gotten longer, and many people work multiple jobs. The average workweek in the USA is now among the longest in the world. People also have children and relationships, and must somehow fit all these things into their lives.

This means that a type of organization that tends to have very protracted meetings is not very useful or welcoming to working people. Consensus is biased in favor of people who work shorter hours or have more flexible schedules, such as students.

An organization that thwarts the will of the majority and gets mired in long meetings is not going to be an effective vehicle for working class people.

An advantage of majority vote direct democracy is its flexibility. If there are a number of less important issues on the agenda, the meeting can move through these fairly quickly and devote more time for discussion of the more important issues. Consensus lacks this flexibility. Also, the requirement of unanimity or a high super-majority makes it harder for an organization to change its program or methods based on experience. There will almost always be a minority who prefer the original orientation that brought them to that organization. They can block a change.

The core of consensus is the ability of any individual to block a decision. David Graeber's version: "Anyone who feels a proposal violates a fundamental principle shared by the group should have the opportunity to veto (block) that proposal."

What counts as a "fundamental principle" is itself something that people are likely to disagree about. When someone blocks a proposal favored by a large majority, a consensus-based group can try to persuade the blocker to "stand aside" (to abstain) or they can make concessions to the blocker.

Even when no one does block, everyone is aware that anyone can. This means that there will be tension in a meeting if someone expresses disagreement with a proposal because people know that person could block it. If a person does block an important action proposal that has majority support, they better be prepared for heavy pressure. This situation actually discourages expression of disagreement. Within a grassroots organization that uses majority vote, people can express disagreement without blocking the majority from pursuing the course of action it favors. This makes dissent less harmful.

Consensus seems to be based on the idea that disagreements can always be overcome through persuasion or talking things over. But this is unrealistic. Even when people are

committed to a common organization or movement, they may have deeply felt disagreements. Critics of consensus have observed for years the tendency to paper over disagreements with poor decisions. Rudy Perkins described this problem in the Clamshell Alliance in New England in the '70s:

"Majority rule is disliked because among the two, three or many courses of action proposed, only one is chosen; the rest are "defeated." Consensus theoretically accommodates everyone's ideas. In practice this often led to:

- A watered down, least-common-denominator solution, or
- The victory of one proposal through intimidation or acquiescence, or
- The creation of a vague proposal to placate everyone, while the plan of one side or another is actually implemented through committees or office staff." (Rudy Perkins, "Breaking with Libertarian Dogma: Lessons from the Anti-Nuclear Struggle," *Black Rose*, Fall, 1979, 15.)

Consensus is based on distrust of the majority. That's why the blocking rule is really the heart of consensus. Disagreements in mass organizations or social movements are inevitable. This means that there will inevitably be some element of pressure because people will be required to accept decisions they are not happy with if they are committed to that organization. Advocates of consensus like David Graeber are concerned to prevent an individual from being forced to go along with a collective decision they strongly disagree with. But they do not see the problem of coercion of the majority by an individual or small minority under consensus rules.