

# A DECISION-MAKING APPROACH TO TRADE UNION DEMOCRACY\*

— Edward Davis\*

The issue of trade union democracy has attracted popular and academic attention for many years in Britain and the U.S.A.. It has been seen to entail important implications for both the society at large and for trade union members in particular. In Britain, at the turn of the century, the Webbs<sup>1</sup> were involved in a painstaking investigation into aspects of union government, and they have since been followed by a number of researchers including Allen,<sup>2</sup> Roberts,<sup>3</sup> and Edelstein and Warner.<sup>4</sup> And in the U.S.A. considerable interest has been demonstrated in the relationship of union members and leaders at the local, national and international level, as observed in studies conducted by Barbash,<sup>5</sup> Brooks,<sup>6</sup> Cook,<sup>7</sup> Sayles and Strauss,<sup>8</sup> and Seidman,<sup>9</sup> among others.<sup>10</sup> But there has been a bare minimum of research along these lines in Australia,<sup>11</sup> and it is hoped that 'work in progress' will begin the process of redressing this imbalance.<sup>12</sup> Such work should be of especial value in Australia where so little has been documented on trade union operations.

The paper is divided into four sections. The first tackles the thorny problem of defining trade union democracy. The second reviews past studies and classifies them according to their primary focus. The third outlines an alternative approach based upon an examination of trade union decision-making and the fourth draws conclusions on the material presented.

## I TOWARDS A DEFINITION OF TRADE UNION DEMOCRACY

Democracy, whether of nation states or trade unions, is commonly perceived as a phenomenon desirable in itself. It is a concept imbued with significance since where, for example, an organisation is judged to be democratic respect

\* Edward Davis is a member of the Economics Department of La Trobe University, Victoria, Australia. This paper was presented to Section 28, Industrial Relations, of the 49th ANZAAS Congress, in Auckland, January 1979.

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- 1 Webb, S. and B., *Industrial Democracy*, (London: Longmans, 1911).
- 2 Allen, V.L., *Power in Trade Unions*, (London: Longmans, 1954).
- 3 Roberts, B.C., *Trade Union Government and Administration in Great Britain*, (London: Bell and Sons, 1956).
- 4 Edelstein, J.D., and Warner, M., *Comparative Union Democracy*, (London: Allen and Unwin, 1975).
- 5 Barbash, J., *Unions and Union Leadership*, (New York: Harper Brothers, 1959).
- 6 Brooks, G.W., *Sources of Vitality in the American Labor Movement*, (Ithaca: New York State School of Industrial Relations, 1960).
- 7 Cook, A.H., *Union Democracy, Practice and Ideal: An Analysis of Four Local Unions*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1963).
- 8 Sayles, L.R., and Strauss, G., *The Local Union*, (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1967).
- 9 Seidman, J., *Democracy in the Labor Movement*, Cornell University Press, 1959).
- 10 For useful reviews of the literature, see Tagliacozzo, D.L., "Trade Union Government: Its Nature and Its Problems", *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol.61, 1956, pp. 554-581, and Strauss, G., "Union Government in the U.S.: Research Past and Future", *Industrial Relations*, Vol.16, 1977, pp. 215-242.
- 11 Howard has provided some useful insights, see Howard, W.A., "Democracy in Trade Unions" in Isaac, J.E., and Ford, G.W., (eds.) *Australian Labour Relations Readings* (Melbourne: Sun Books, 1974), pp. 264-279; see also Davis, E.M. *Decision Making in the A.M.W.S.U.: A Study of the Victorian Branch (M.Ec. thesis; Monash University, 1977) for an impression of democracy within one union.*
- 12 The author is currently engaged in a comparative study of trade union decision making and democracy. Some initial findings are recorded below.

and approval will follow in contrast to the condemnation reserved for organisations where democracy is found wanting.<sup>13</sup> Yet while important repercussions flow from opinions as to the state of democracy, the concept has only rarely been defined and in practice tends to mean many things to many people. In consequence discussions of union democracy, unaccompanied by a definition of the phenomenon, have often confused rather than enlightened.

Primary responsibility for this circumstance can be ascribed to the multi-dimensional nature of the concept. It is evident that for some people democracy means a 'bill of rights', for others, elections, and for yet others, the frequent participation of members in the affairs of the organisation, and so on. There are therefore a variety of 'senses' of democracy, each of some importance. This reality therefore confronts any attempt to provide a simple definition and imposes a responsibility upon those discussing democracy to identify the sense or senses to which they are referring. Before enlarging on this theme, it is appropriate to examine the definitions employed in past studies.

The Webbs provided both a general and a more limited definition. In the preface of their *magnum opus* we find:

"Trade unions are democracies: that is to say their internal constitutions are all based on the principle of 'government of the people, by the people for the people'.<sup>14</sup>

but they suggested that in practice only very small unions were administered in this fashion, which they described as "primitive democracy". As unions grew in size and their administrations became more complex they emphasised that it was impossible for 'all the people to make all the decisions'.<sup>15</sup> However the Webbs did not see this development as necessarily spelling the extinction of democracy. The flame could be kept alight by representative processes which ensured government according to the wishes of the membership. Two conditions were deemed important; the sensitivity of officials to the views of the rank and file, and the operation of representative assemblies which were noted to be "the last word of democracy".<sup>16</sup>

The Webbs' broad understanding of union democracy can be contrasted to the view adopted by Lipset *et al.* in their famous study of the International Typographical Union.<sup>17</sup> For them, union democracy became "the possibility that an official can be defeated for re-election" and was observed to flourish in the unique two-party system of the I.T.U.<sup>18</sup> This notion of union democracy has been adapted in various ways. While Martin has enlarged it, so that democracy is seen as a state of affairs where an opposition is tolerated,<sup>19</sup> (which therefore reflects members' enjoyment of basic political rights within their organisation) Edelstein and Warner have refined it to the point where democracy can be judged by the closeness of competition for top union posts,

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- 13 Democracy however is not a sufficient criterion for approval, i.e. a 'democratic' union which takes frequent strike action may well be criticised for abusing its power.
- 14 Webbs, *op. cit.*, p.v.
- 15 The tussle of administrative and representative 'rationales' has recently been discussed by Child, J., Lovridge, R., and Warner, M., "Towards an Organisational Study of Trade Unions", *Sociology*, Vol. 7, 1973, pp. 71-91.
- 16 Webbs, *op. cit.*, p.41 and 64.
- 17 Lipset, S., Trow, M., and Coleman, J.S., *Union Democracy: The Internal Politics of the International Typographical Union* (Glencoe: Free Press, 1956).
- 18 *Ibid.*, p.404.
- 19 Martin, R., "Union Democracy: An Explanatory Framework" in McCarthy, W.E.J. (ed.) *Trade Unions and Democracy* (London: Penguin, 1972).

and the frequency of defeat for incumbents.<sup>20</sup> However, Edelstein and Warner have also provided a very comprehensive definition of union democracy, and engaged in discussion of the possible shapes and sizes of the phenomenon.<sup>21</sup> Their broad definition appears to cover the various aspects in which unions are usually judged to be democratic or not;

"Democracy in a large organisation or society is a decision-making system in which the membership actively participates, directly and indirectly through its representatives, in the making and implementation of policy and in the selection of officials, for all levels, on the basis of political equality and majority rule. Furthermore, the system operates on the basis of the accountability of officials, the legitimacy of opposition, and a due process for the protection of the rights of individuals and minorities."<sup>22</sup>

But while these authors indicate a comprehensive view of democracy, they do not themselves attempt an assessment of the various dimensions of democracy, preferring to limit their analysis to trade union electoral processes. Does such a basis furnish sufficient grounds for verdicts on the presence or absence of union democracy? It is contended here that it does not and cannot precisely because of the multi-dimensional nature of the phenomenon. In practice, unions are often democratic in senses 'a', 'b', and 'c' and undemocratic in 'd' and 'e'. For instance, most unions in Australia guarantee members' freedom of speech, right to vote, rights to nominate for position and also encourage the participation of their members in the unions' representative assemblies, but experience has shown that few incumbent officials are challenged for re-election and that participation levels are often low.<sup>23</sup> Therefore, only if a union scored well or badly on *all* relevant criteria could an unambiguous statement be made. And even then the absence of a yardstick for the assessment of democracy is conspicuous. As yet, there are no 'inches, feet and yards' for the measurement of democracy.

What can be done? The following approach is suggested as a means by which statements on union democracy can be more soundly based. Firstly, the multi-dimensional character of union democracy is recognised and a comprehensive research programme is devised so as to identify and investigate its most important dimensions. And secondly, a number of unions are examined which then facilitates a comparative study, and generates a frame of reference internal to the research. For instance, when due allowance is made for contextual factors, it should be possible to rank unions in terms of the rights guaranteed in their rule books, their electoral experiences, member participation and so on. On this basis, union i could be said to be democratic in sense 'a' relative to unions ii - v, and so on. However, generalisations about union democracy based upon a summation of analyses of the various dimensions can only be impressionistic since, among other things, the different senses of

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20 Edelstein and Warner, *op.cit.*, p.33, pp.65-66.

21 Edelstein, J.D. and Warner, M., "The Meaning and Dimensions of Democracy in Work Related Organisations", *Journal of Industrial Relations*, Vol.20, 1978, pp.133-137.

22 Edelstein and Warner (1975), *op.cit.*, p.30.

23 The Australian Commonwealth Conciliation and Arbitration Act determines the provision of basic rights to members in union rule books. For further discussion, see Yerbury, D. "The Main Characteristics of Trade Union Law in the Australian Compulsory Arbitration Systems" in Isaac and Ford, *op.cit.*, pp.123-165.

democracy are dissimilar in character. A series of rankings would therefore appear more appropriate facilitating comment according to performance in the dimensions specified.

The major problem associated with such a research programme resides in the heroic proportions of the task, since both a number of senses of democracy and a range of trade unions must be examined. Unless such an enterprise becomes a life-work, there will evidently be a trade-off in terms of depth of analysis of any one union, and the breadth of the overall exercise. However, the catholic approach suggested here enjoys two advantages. Firstly, studies of one union, while they may be comprehensive in themselves, cannot form the basis of generalisations about union democracy; a study of a number of unions is better placed in this respect. Secondly, a study of one dimension in a number of unions reflects only a partial view of the performance of these unions.<sup>24</sup> Again, generalisations would be on unfirm ground. Therefore research based upon an inspection of the various senses of democracy in a number of unions appears the most likely to paint a comprehensive view of union democracy.

In the next section, the dimensions of democracy reviewed in past studies are illustrated and discussed.

## II PAST STUDIES

A number of accounts of union democracy are classified here under four headings, as being primarily concerned with

- (1) Union Constitutions
- (2) Elections
- (3) Participation, and
- (4) The Organisation.

It should however be recognised that the act of categorisation necessarily entails a simplification of the focus of the studies listed below, many of which have devoted at least some attention to more than one aspect of union democracy.

### The Union Constitution.

Roberts<sup>25</sup> and Allen<sup>26</sup> in Britain, Taft<sup>27</sup> in the U.S.A. and Fox<sup>28</sup> in Australia have made notable contributions to the investigation of the rights guaranteed to members in union constitutions. The following are seen to be of crucial significance, and are usually judged to be preconditions for democracy; freedom of speech for all members, the right to vote and nominate for positions in union elections, the provision of opportunities to participate in the decision-making processes of the organisation and an appeal system. In general, most union rule books contain provisions along these lines although there are a number of incidences of irregularities. For instance, Goldstein found that due to the qualifications required to run for office in the British Transport and General

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24 viz. "A partial view of anything, accurate as it may be within its limits, must of necessity be a distorted one", Flanders, A., *Industrial Relations, What is Wrong with the System?* (London: Faber, 1969), p.9.

25 *op.cit.*

26 *op.cit.*

27 Taft, P., *Structure and Government of Labour Unions*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1962). Taft devoted particular attention to union appeal systems.

28 Fox, C., *Some Aspects of Union Regulation: The Implications for Union Democracy*, (Monash University: M. Admin. thesis, 1975).

Workers' Union only 6% of the membership were in fact eligible to contest such positions,<sup>29</sup> and Hemingway reported a most unusual voting system in the British National Union of Seamen whereby members for less than a year did not enjoy a vote in union elections, those with one year to four years completed membership were entitled to one vote, from five to nine years membership earned two votes and so on up to a total of four votes for members who had served fifteen years!<sup>30</sup> In Australia, while there are no instances of the latter there is discussion in some unions over the appropriate number of years of membership before a member can contest an election,<sup>31</sup> the merits of collegiate as against 'general' elections, and the appointment rather than election of some officials. Each can be seen to carry implications for union democracy since the ability of members to influence the affairs of their organisations is at stake.

There are two further points which deserve brief consideration. Firstly, the role played by referenda has stirred controversy for many years. Do they constitute an opportunity for the rank and file to make decisions, or are they a sham, a device used at the convenience of the incumbents?<sup>32</sup> Certainly it is necessary to ask additional questions such as which matters are decided by referenda, what information is given to the members on the issue in hand, how frequently are they used, who phrases the question, and so on. Secondly, while it is crucial that rule books provide for the operation of representative bodies, the researcher must pay attention to how the network of union conferences, councils and committees works in practice. If these bodies are dominated by the incumbent officials and business is processed without the due consideration and involvement of lay representatives, then these bodies have contributed little to the stuff of democracy which depends *inter alia* upon the interest and involvement of the membership through their elected representatives. Therefore the rules alone, revealing though they may be, do not provide a sufficient basis on which to judge the state of democracy.<sup>33</sup>

### Elections.

Elections in liberal democratic states play a particularly important role. They are seen to be a method which enables the will of the people (or at least the majority) to be translated into the policies of government.<sup>34</sup> This occurs in the following manner. In brief, elections offer a choice to the electorate, and candidates, in a bid to win votes, are induced to support popular policies. Where these policies are implemented by the successful candidate, democracy can be seen to function. Such is the reasoning of proponents of elections as an instrument of democracy in both nations and trade unions.

The attention paid by Lipset *et al.* and Edelstein and Warner to elections as the litmus test of union democracy necessitates our further attention here,

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29 Goldstein, J., *The Government of British Trade Unions*, (London: Allen and Unwin, 1952), p.180.

30 Hemingway, J., *Conflict and Democracy*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), p.40.

31 For example, the A.M.W.S.U. requires candidates for national posts to have seven years financial membership which has received criticism as too long an 'apprenticeship'. A.M.W.S.U. *Rules* (Sydney: A.M.W.S.U., 1977), Rule 2, clause 9.

32 Both the Webbs and Michels held very low opinions of referenda. See Webbs *op.cit.*, p.26, and Michels, R., *Political Parties* (New York: Collier Books, 1962) p.310. See also Fryer, R.H., Fairclough, A.J., and Manson, T.B., "Democracy in Trade Unions", *Personnel Management* Vol.7, 1975, p.20.

33 A similar conclusion can be found in Bealey, F.W. "The Political System of the Post Office Engineering Union", *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, Vol.XV, 1977, p.376.

34 See Pateman, C., *Participation and Democratic Theory*, (Cambridge University Press, 1970), pp.3-6.

more especially since contested elections in Australia have become the exception rather than the rule.<sup>35</sup> In the most recent round of elections held in the eight Victorian State Branches examined by the author, six Branches returned all their officials unopposed, and the remaining two witnessed elections for only one or two out of a team of officials.<sup>36</sup> However one of the Branches, that of the A.B.E.U., has recently held fiercely contested elections for the lay positions on its Branch Council reflecting the important role of lay officials in that union and the continuation of left: right tensions among the membership. In many other Australian unions such political struggles petered out by the end of the 1960's and their eclipse has enabled a significant proportion of incumbent officials to look forward to an unchallenged tenure of office. Has democracy been extinguished in these unions or are there cogent reasons which suggest the limited value of conclusions drawn solely upon the basis of electoral performance?

Michels has listed a number of criticisms of elections as a method of democracy. He has argued that elections provide only the opportunity to choose a "new set of masters" and that when the polls close, the powerlessness of the people returns since they are unable to influence government during incumbents' terms of office. Also, and with particular relevance to trade unions, the very act of election initiates a metamorphosis separating the leader from the led. The union member who ascends to a full-time position leaves behind him the sweat of the workshop, and becomes accustomed to a new environment and social milieu. In Michels' terms he is *declassé* in contrast to the members he serves. Lastly, the damage to democracy is greatest where the newly elected leader inflicts autocratic policies on the basis that these policies represent the will of the people as embodied in him. Where this occurs elections are seen to legitimise autocracy rather than provide for democracy.<sup>37</sup>

Similar criticisms have been echoed by Lucas and Pateman who have argued that the assumptions of liberal democratic theory rarely hold in the real world since the electorate has imperfect knowledge about candidates and their policies, there is no guarantee that policies proclaimed in manifestos will be implemented in practice, and often there is only a limited choice of candidates (a fact related in part to the expense of campaigning which represents a sizeable barrier for impecunious groups). And further, they have pointed to the derisory amount of participation required in the process of elections. On these grounds they have challenged the notion that an electoral process makes a significant contribution to democracy, whether of unions or states.<sup>38</sup>

Perhaps the final point to be noted here is that while opposition to certain union officials and policies can be expected in every union, there are a variety of ways pressure can be applied. For instance the representative network furnishes a number of levels at which criticisms can be made, and if this is unsuccessful there are a range of informal avenues to be explored, such as 'unofficial

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35 As they also appear to be in the U.S.A. and Canada. See respectively, Taft, *op. cit.*, ch. 2 and Chaison, G.N., and Rose, J.B., "Turnover Among Presidents of Canadian National Unions", *Industrial Relations*, Vol. 16, 1977, pp. 199-204.

36 For a more detailed picture of the A.M.W.S.U.'s experience, see Davis, E., *op. cit.*, p. 114. See also "A Profile of Decision-Makers in the A.M.W.S.U.'s Victorian Branch", *Journal of Industrial Relations*, Vol. XX, 1978, pp. 179-190.

37 Michels, *op. cit.*, pp. 75-76, pp. 107-128, pp. 205-217.

38 Pateman, *op. cit.*, and Lucas, J., *Democracy and Participation*, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976).

action', policies of non-co-operation with the officials, the picketing of the union office etc.<sup>39</sup> Most unionists will not be totally unfamiliar with such pressure-strategies!

### Participation.

A number of authors have emphasised the crucial role of members' participation in union affairs. Where members are seen to be involved directly in decision-making processes, or indirectly through their representatives, then the Webbs' classic conditions of government for, by, and of the people appear to be met. However some qualifications are in order. Firstly, the economic, technological and geographical environment of a union will fashion the opportunities to participate which its members enjoy. For example, dockyard and pithead meetings are usually much better attended than meetings of agricultural workers.<sup>40</sup> The reality of different environments of operation has therefore prevented the erection of a simple yardstick designed to measure the performance of different unions according to this criterion. Secondly, as Selvin points out, it is important that participating members are aware of and informed about the issues to be decided, enabling them to play a meaningful role in the process of debate and decision-making.<sup>41</sup> Thirdly, participation in itself does not constitute democracy. For instance, well attended meetings which are largely ceremonial in character are probably irrelevant in terms of union democracy, although meetings where decisions of prime importance are argued out and decided upon appear the very stuff of democracy.<sup>42</sup> But in addition, it should not be assumed that poorly attended meetings necessarily reveal a state of oligarchy, since it would appear that a negative trigger is often the spur to participation, and the apparent apathy of members can often be explained either by their relative satisfaction with their officials' handling of union affairs, or their general indifference.<sup>43</sup>

Let us look in brief at four arenas in which members have the opportunity to participate;

- (1) union conferences and councils,
- (2) residential branches (members are assigned to that branch nearest their place of residence),
- (3) the shop-floor, and
- (4) aggregate or mass meetings.

Carew's research on the operation of representative bodies such as conferences and councils has indicated the important role of these bodies.<sup>44</sup> They are often the supreme decision-making organs and therefore the involvement of delegates in these meetings is of much importance. Carew has directed our attention to the following features; the size, frequency and length of conferences and councils, the proportion of officials to rank and file delegates, the

39 See Hemingway, *op.cit.*, who describes in detail members' use of such tactics.

40 See Hughes, J., *Trade Union Structure and Government*, (Royal Commission on Trade Unions and Employers Associations: H.M.S.O., 1967), Research Paper, No. 5, Pt.II, pp.15-16.

41 Selvin, D.F., "Communications in Trade Unions: A Study of Union Journals", *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, Vol.1., No.1., 1963, pp.73-93.

42 See Cook, *op.cit.*

43 Time and space preclude a discussion of apathy in unions, its causes and its significance; *n.b.*, Moran, M., *The Union of Post Office Workers*, (London: Macmillan, 1974) noted the lack of involvement of postal workers and ascribed it, in the main, to the union's marginal role in the lives of its members (p.76).

44 Carew, A., *Democracy and Government in European Trade Unions* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1976). See also Roberts, *op.cit.*, p.160.

influence of these bodies, the method of selecting the agenda, the choice of chairman and the report-back and ratification procedures which follow the deliberations of these bodies. For instance, where conferences are infrequent, short, dominated by officials and merely a rubber-stamp for already formulated policies, they make little contribution to democracy. On these grounds a careful scrutiny of the operations of these bodies in a number of unions is required which will generate a series of impressions as to the comparative state of affairs.<sup>45</sup>

Many unions maintain a residential branch structure, and although they now attract a bare minimum of members, long-term activists appear loath to see their demise. They remain a potential channel for rank and file involvement but one that is usually ignored for a number of reasons.<sup>46</sup> Members often have to travel some distance to the meetings where routine and frequently boring business is under discussion. In addition, meetings are usually held in the evenings and members have indicated that they prefer to spend their time engaged in alternative pursuits. A further factor is that branch meetings no longer play the important role of being the primary dispenser of benefits and advice, and collector of dues. Benefits can be sought either in the workshop or from the union office, advice can be gained over the telephone and dues are now gathered in a variety of ways including payroll deductions, and shop collections.

A different picture emerges when attention is directed to members' involvement at the shop-floor level. As recent studies have confirmed, workers' primary concerns are improved wages and conditions and trade unions are perceived to be the appropriate instrument for their achievement.<sup>47</sup> Therefore the motive for involvement at the shop level is present, as is the opportunity, since meetings can be called in lunch-times and can often be held in the canteen, or on the shop floor. In addition, the catalytic role of the shop steward should be recalled.<sup>48</sup> For many union members, the shop steward is the union especially since full-time officials usually have sizeable electorates which therefore inhibits the growth of strong ties with any particular group of the membership. But the shop steward is ever present, and shares the daily work experience of other members. He or she is then in a unique position to encourage the interest and involvement of members in the matters which are of immediate concern to them, such as shop wages and conditions. Where shop-floor meetings are frequent the 'primitive democracy' described by the Webbs appears to be very much alive.<sup>49</sup>

Aggregates, or mass rallies, are a familiar part of the decision-making process of many unions in Australia and as such they present a picture of rank and file involvement in major decisions to take or cease industrial action, to accept or reject a pay offer, etc.. In so far as this is the case, an element of 'primitive

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45 Regular attendance at meetings has therefore been necessary.

46 Roberts estimated average branch attendance at between 4-7%, *op. cit.*, p.95; n.b. this would be an over-statement of attendance at the A.M.W.S.U.'s branch meetings. See Davis, E.M. "Decision Making in the Australian A.M.W.S.U.'s", *Industrial Relations*, Vol.16, 1977, pp.126-132.

47 See Goldthorpe, J.G., Lockwood, D., Bechhofer, F., and Platt, J., *The Affluent Worker: Industrial Attitudes and Behaviour*, (Cambridge University Press, 1968), ch.5. See also Ramsay, H., "Participation, the Shop floor View", *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, Vol. XIV.

48 There has been a flurry of studies on shop stewards in Britain. Among others, the following deserve attention. Batstone, I., Boraston, I., and Frenkel, S., *Shop Stewards in Action* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1977); Boraston, I., Clegg, H., and Bannister, M., *Workplace and Union*, (London: Heinemann, 1975); Brown, W., Ebsworth, R., and Terry, M., "Factors Shaping Shop Steward Organisation in Britain", *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, Vol. XVI, 1976, and Goodman, J.F.B., and Winstingham, T.G., *Shop Stewards in British Industry*, (London: McGraw Hill, 1969).

49 However, there is some concern that as the role of the shop steward becomes both more complex and more formalised, the close relationship of shop steward to members will suffer affecting the pattern of shop floor involvement, and the representativeness of the steward. See Brown *et al.*, *op. cit.*, who cite the growth of full-time shop stewards in British manufacturing as indicative of this trend.



democracy' is again present although it is important that the following conditions are also met which prevents them from being merely rituals of legitimisation in which members play only a passive role. Members called to mass rallies should be aware of the matter to be decided and should preferably have had an opportunity to discuss the issue at their work places.<sup>50</sup> There should be opportunities for all those who wish to express an opinion to do so, and the matter should be thoroughly debated before a vote is taken. The recent experience in Australia of a number of unions in dispute situations has been that these conditions have been *seen* to have been met which has then legitimised decisions taken and usually bolstered feelings of solidarity, and strength of purpose.<sup>51</sup> The rally has thus served a dual purpose. However it should be noted that mass rallies do not constitute a method for day-to-day union government and their role is therefore confined to the determination of extraordinary issues.

The paper has indicated a number of areas in which participation is possible and has observed the range of conditions which affect involvement in these spheres. Because of differences in union environments, and the need to distinguish decisive from ceremonial involvement, participation alone does not appear a satisfactory benchmark for the evaluation of democracy. Perhaps a more useful indication resides in those measures taken by the union to encourage participation, such as the provision of information, and other steps designed to secure the interest and involvement of the rank and file.

### **The Organisation.**

Trade unions, in response to technological changes and the market power of corporations, have increased in membership size throughout this century. Have they then become the oligarchies predicted by Michels who argued that while organisation was required to realise trade union aims, their development simultaneously eroded those conditions favourable to democracy?<sup>52</sup> Michels stated that once an organisation had been conceived, albeit to further the interests of the membership, it could be seen to acquire goals of its own, such as its security and expansion. Also, once elected to positions of power and responsibility leaders could be expected to pursue measures which would strengthen their own incumbency and suppress opposition amongst the membership. In addition, the gulf between leaders, skilled in oratory and administration, and the general membership could be expected to widen, and this would be accelerated by the 'metamorphosis' already discussed. For such reasons Michels proclaimed, "who says organisation, says oligarchy!"<sup>53</sup>

Michels' work has had a profound impact upon research into trade union government, and its hallmark can be found in studies conducted by Lipset *et al.* and Goldstein, amongst others.<sup>54</sup> However, while it is important to study the character of and relations within a trade union organisation, this paper refutes the notion that organisation necessarily entails oligarchy for a number of reasons. For instance, most trade union constitutions provide a series of checks and balances to prevent the abuse of power. The operation of the representative system of the union and pressure from the shop-floor to satisfy

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50 The mass media often ensure that at least one side of the issue has been put to workers! Beharrell, P. and Philo, G., *Trade Unions and the Media*, (London: Macmillan Press, 1977).

51 Three major disputes where mass rallies played a large role were the La Trobe Valley Strike (1977), and the Utah and Telecom disputes (1978).

52 In Michels' words, "We escape Scylla only to dash ourselves on Charybdis", *op. cit.*, p.62.

53 Michels, *op. cit.*, p.365

54 *op. cit.*

members' wishes both act to combat oligarchical tendencies.<sup>55</sup> And the decisions of most importance to members, concerned with their shop wages and conditions, are, to an increasing extent, being taken by them at shop-floor level and this represents perhaps the greatest deterrent to oligarchy.<sup>56</sup>

### III A DECISION-MAKING APPROACH

An examination of past studies has indicated a number of areas where attention is required for a comprehensive view of union democracy. The following framework, based upon an analysis of union decision-making, demonstrates some interest in each of these lines of inquiry in so far as their results throw light upon decision-making within unions. Therefore the lynch-pin and distinguishing characteristic of the approach adopted here is its concentration upon the nature of decision-making as central to the determination of union democracy. A further feature of this approach is its ability to investigate a number of dimensions of democracy, whilst at the same time relating them to a central theme, namely decision making.

Let us look now at the research programme constructed by the author and at some initial findings. Firstly the economic, technological and geographic environment of the eight unions making up the sample has been inspected in order that the preconditions from rank and file involvement can be taken into account.<sup>57</sup> Secondly, the following sets of questions have been asked:

- (1) What decisions are made by the union; do these reflect the viewpoint of the membership?
- (2) How are decisions made; are there opportunities for members to participate and to what extent do members actually participate?
- (3) Who are the decision-makers; are they representative of the rank and file?

The answers to these questions are then taken to indicate the relative democracy of these unions, with democracy itself defined as a condition where decisions taken reflect the will of the members, where there are opportunities to participate and significant levels of actual participation in the unions' decision-making processes, and where decision-makers are representative of the members. But, as foreshadowed above, no attempt is made here to devise an absolute measure of democracy and the emphasis is placed rather upon the relative performance of the unions.

In the author's research to date it has become apparent that a great variety of decisions are taken by unions at a number of levels. At the conference, council and executive levels of State Branches, decisions are made on matters necessary to the daily existence of the organisation (such as in reference to the unions' financial affairs), the industrial problems confronting the membership and a range of other matters concerning local, national and international events.<sup>58</sup> Where decisions concern union administrations or their involvement

55 See Coleman, J.R. "The Compulsive Pressures of Democracy in Unionism", *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 66, 1960, pp. 519-526.

56 A useful critique of Michels' work can be found in Gouldner, A.L., "Metaphysical Pathos and the Theory of Bureaucracy", Etzioni, A. (ed.), *Complex Organisations* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston) pp. 71-80.

57 For further discussion, see Hyman, R., *Industrial Relations: A Marxist Introduction*, London: Macmillan, 1976, p. 69. Note: The eight unions are named on the title page.

58 For an account of the A.M.W.S.U.'s distribution of its attention, see Davis (thesis), *op. cit.*, pp. 59-86.

in political issues, rank and file members usually indicate little interest as decisions of this nature rarely impinge upon their immediate environment.<sup>59</sup> But where decisions are concerned with industrial matters there is considerable pressure on these bodies to ensure that they reflect the will of the membership since these matters are likely to be of greatest concern to the members. The view of the rank and file is frequently made known via the opinion of shop-floor representatives, and resolutions passed at shop and branch level. Also organisers are often in a position to remark on their perception of how the members stand on an issue.

The efforts of two unions to determine the wishes of its members are worthy of further attention. Firstly, the small Victorian Printers' Operatives Union generally conducts special General Meetings at which secret ballots are used to determine decisions on issues such as the acceptance or rejection of the major industrial agreement covering the membership.<sup>60</sup> Secondly, the Australian Bank Employees' Union has made use recently of opinion sampling techniques designed to elicit the views of the passive bulk of the membership who do not attend meetings and rarely come into contact with the union's officials. The results of such surveys have assumed particular significance due to the forthcoming referendum on that union's affiliation to the Australian Council of Trade Unions.<sup>61</sup>

Before leaving the matter of the reflective quality of union decisions, it should be reiterated that in many unions those decisions of most concern to members, related to shop wages and conditions, are made at shop floor level and thus can be seen to correspond directly to members' wishes.

The formal decision-making process is delineated in union rule books, which must be carefully examined in order to gather information both as to the rights guaranteed to members, and to provide answers to the list of questions which Carew suggested would throw light upon the degree to which the formal structure represented the views of members and encouraged delegate involvement. But perhaps the more important and telling investigation is that which inquires into the unions' *de facto* decision-making processes and performance.

There are four arenas where close attention is required. Firstly, it is necessary to see how the unions' representative bodies process their business, and in particular to observe the character of debate, the extent of delegate participation and the method of resolution. As noted earlier, where matters are passed continually without debate and with little delegate participation, or where controversial issues are earmarked for decision by the unions' officers rather than conferences or councils, these meetings appear to make little contribution to democracy since the members via their representatives are not involved in the process of union government.

Of the eight unions' meetings, attended by the author, two unions have been witnessed to have relatively lengthy meetings where many issues have been hotly debated and this can be related to left: right tensions within these Bran-

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59 See Davis, thesis, *op. cit.*, ch.5.

60 For instance, the V.P.O.U. 'General Meeting' of 20/11/78.

61 See *Don't Miss the Bus*, A.B.E.U., Victorian Division, pamphlet (not dated) on affiliation to the A.C.T.U., n.b. sample surveys have played the valuable role of pinpointing those sections of the membership (by age, sex and rank) which do not wish to affiliate and where additional persuasion is therefore required!

ches. Four regularly have long meetings where delegates participate fully, but where disagreement and close votes are the exception and not the rule. And the remaining two have short, uncontroversial meetings and engage little in the way of delegate involvement, though both of these unions have a record of taking steps to represent the views of their members in other ways.

At the residential branch and shop-floor level members' participation has generally been of the character indicated above. Of the eight unions only the A.M.W.S.U. has a residential branch structure while two of the other unions have a sub-branch structure of sorts and the remaining five make no provision of this kind.<sup>62</sup> The unions with residential or sub-branch structures are generally disappointed with the attendance at these meetings, but have not taken action to dismantle this structure. However, at the work place, all of the unions have recorded significant levels of rank and file involvement especially when there has been some pressing issue to be decided. And widespread concern at this level has also played a part in promoting attendance at 'area' or central shop steward and delegate meetings,<sup>63</sup> and at the aggregates that have been called by some unions from time to time. Again, for a thorough understanding of the contribution to democracy, further questions should be asked, for instance about measures taken by the union to encourage members' participation, the influence of subsequent decisions and so on.

Finally, attention is turned to the third avenue of the research, designed to examine the representativeness of the decision-makers.<sup>64</sup> Firstly, it is necessary to specify which groups of decision-makers should be examined and secondly what characteristics should be taken into account. The important role of the trade union secretary and other full-time officials makes them prime candidates for our attention,<sup>65</sup> but for a comprehensive picture, unions' research and other staff, lay officials and delegates, shop stewards and the membership itself should also be considered since each group plays a role in union decision-making processes.<sup>66</sup>

Three characteristics stand out as deserving of attention; personal factors (such as sex, age, country of birth and trade background); attitudes and behaviour. To take the first of these, trade unions have been notorious as amongst the last bastions of male chauvinism. While approximately 30% of trade union members in Australia are female, there are still relatively few female full-time officials.<sup>67</sup> In the eight unions examined by the author, of approximately fifty full-time officials, only three are female.<sup>68</sup> Therefore, in those unions with concentrations of female members there is the possibility that conditions will not favour the communication of rank and file views to the extent

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62 The A.B.E.U. has a sub-branch structure based upon the bank in which a member works, and A.A.E.S.D.A. makes provision for sub-branches to be set up where a sufficient number of members make the request. n.b. the F.I.A. have no sub-branches in Victoria, but the Newcastle Branch is divided into eight sub-branches. See F.I.A. *Rules* (Melbourne: F.I.A.), p.44.

63 For instance, the Storemen and Packers Unions' Victorian Annual Delegates Conference, held on 13/10/78, which over 300 delegates attended.

64 Valuable work on this theme has been undertaken by Roberts, *op.cit.*, Allen, *op.cit.*, and Allen, V.L., *Trade Union Leadership*, (London: Longmans, 1957) and by Clegg, H.A., Killick, A.J., and Adams, R., *Trade Union Officers* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1961).

65 See Davis, 1978, *op.cit.*, for a profile of the A.M.W.S.U.'s officials.

66 Wilensky, H.L., *Intellectuals in Trade Unions*, (Glencoe: Free Press, 1956) has provided a useful and thorough discussion of the role of union experts in the U.S.A.. Similar studies are required in Britain and Australia.

67 Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1976, *Labour Statistics*, Ref. No.6.61, p.121.

68 Poor female representation is also discussed by Hughes, *op.cit.*, pp.29-30.

that might be enjoyed under more representative circumstances. The same is also probably true where unions are predominantly made up of non-English speaking migrant workers, but where the background of the officials is uniformly either British or Australian. Language and cultural considerations then provide seemingly insuperable barriers to communications between these groups with the result that migrants have often played little role in their trade unions.<sup>69</sup> And lastly; there are many examples of 'general' unions, (which recruit both skilled and unskilled members) which are dominated in practice by officials and delegates drawn from a skilled background. Where this is the case, it is possible that unskilled members have access to a less sympathetic ear than if their ranks were better represented in union hierarchies.<sup>70</sup>

But what of attitudes and behaviour? It seems probable that the attitudes of officials and delegates may well diverge from those espoused by union memberships, and this can be related to the interest and activism which propelled them into official positions. On this basis alone they are unrepresentative but this is of diminished consequence since, in response to the ever present calls from the rank and file for attention to shop matters, officials' and delegates' behaviour can usually be seen to conform to and represent the perceived wishes of the membership. Where this is the case, unrepresentativeness of both characteristics and attitudes pale in significance, since the key factor is the extent to which union officials, at every level, pursue the wishes of their members.

#### IV CONCLUSION

The paper began by canvassing the issue of union democracy and noting the definitional problems that confronted research into this issue. It was argued that in past studies there was often a failure to identify the specific dimensions of democracy on which remarks were based, and further that a benchmark for its evaluation was generally absent. Therefore, in this paper, an approach has been outlined which identifies a number of important dimensions of democracy and generates a yardstick through a comparative study which at least facilitates a series of performance rankings. Finally, it has been contended that an examination of the decisions made in trade unions, their formal and particularly their informal decision-making processes, and the character of the decision-makers themselves will provide the necessary materials for a comprehensive picture of the relative state of democracy in a number of trade unions.

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69 See Hearn, J.M., "Migrant Participation in Trade Union Leadership", *Journal of Industrial Relations*, Vol.18, 1976, pp.112-123.

70 For instance, see Boraston *et al.*, *op.cit.*, p.11 on the British Amalgamated Union of Engineering Workers, and Davis, E., "Decision-Making in the A.M.W.S.U.", *Journal of Industrial Relations*, Vol.18, 1977, p.361.