When I sat down to prepare this lecture I realized the dilemma that I faced. First, I had to deal with an exceedingly singular characteristic of US trade unions; historically, trade unions in the United States have had more full time paid union officials in proportion to total membership than any other union movement in the world. Union office, moreover, has also been more of a career choice for ambitious workers than anywhere else in the world.\(^1\)

Obviously, such a phenomenon merits serious scholarly study. Hence it should come as no surprise that we have numerous sociological examinations of trade union leadership of which the most famous is perhaps C. Wright Mills, "New Men of Power" (1948). We also have available one exceptionally well researched and reliable historical study of the same subject completed by a former student of mine, Warren Van Tine, and published in 1973 as "The Making of the Labor Bureaucrat". Yet all these studies share a common approach or tendency. They examine the family and social origins of union leaders and officials; their ethnoreligious characteristics; their political beliefs and affiliations; the social patterns and interactions among union leaders, especially their propensity to join a wide variety of voluntary associations. Yet, as a group, these sociological studies of trade-union leadership devote almost no attention to the process by which people became or become union leaders, Van Tine notwithstanding, or to historical and contemporary patterns of leadership training and recruitment.\(^2\)

An even more treacherous problem in coming to terms with the subject of trade-union leadership in United States history is perhaps definitional, that is, defining precisely who labor leaders and/or union officials are. This problem affected me directly and personally during the summers of 1980 and 1981 when I taught seminars sponsored by the National Endowment for the Humanities for so-called labor leaders. My seminar participants, some thirty young men and women, scarcely thought of themselves as labor leaders or significant union officials. Mostly elected local union officers or appointed staff people in regional or state labor bodies, they reserved the title "labor leader" for the higher officers of national and international unions and for the elected officers of the AFL-CIO and their senior staff. My experiences teaching these younger union officials about the history of the movement that they served reminded me of the following dialogue from a brilliant essay on labor

\* Auf Anfrage kann eine deutsche Zusammenfassung dieses Beitrages zur Verfügung gestellt werden.
leadership by one of the few intellectuals to serve the American union
movement, J.B.S. Hardman. In his essay, Hardman conducted an imaginary
dialogue between a contemporary union official and his younger former self
concerning the definition and role of a labor leader: "...you are not a leader of
labor, you are a labor leader..." says the younger former self. "One is a fighter,
the other a professional." But, responds the older, contemporary self, "labor is
not an army in the field. Labor is a part of the state. It must have its own
competent administration." As I want to point out through an examination of
the history of trade-union leadership in the United States, there has been a
persistent tension between the role of labor leaders as fighters and as
professionals.

Perhaps the best way to come to grips with the history of trade-union
leadership in the United States is to take a generational approach to the
subject. By examining how different generations of labor leaders have defined
their responsibilities and behaved in practice, we can better see which features
of their official positions have persisted and which have changed during the
past century.

The first generation of fulltime paid union officials originated during the years
1870–1900, when it can be said that the modern American trade union
movement emerged. During those three decades, a few exceptions
notwithstanding, trade union leadership exhibited an absence of patterns, formal
structures, and what might be called career or promotion tracks. Most of the
era's infant and adolescent trade unions shared a history of instability and bare
treasuries. Frequently, local, regional, and national union officials found
themselves leaders without organizations or officers without income. Whether as
a result of unions collapsing, their being unable to pay their officials, or of
rank-and-file rebellions against elected officials, a pattern of extremely rapid
turnover at all levels of the union movement characterized everyday reality in
the universe of labor leaders. After all, at a time when unions were as likely
to suffer setbacks as to enjoy triumphs, the removal of elected leaders was one
way that the membership could manifest its discontent. In such a universe,
moreover, the labor leaders, who could scarcely expect tenure of office or
secure sources of income, practiced forms of crass opportunism. Scores of
local financial secretaries succumbed to the lure of quick financial gain, as
attested by numerous reports in union journals detailing the escapades of such
officials who absconded with the organization's treasury. For a leadership
largely drawn from the shop floor and for many of whom claims of conscience
or political ideology were absent, it was only natural to seize the main chance.
Not only to run off with union funds, but more often, for those talented
workers who rose from the shop floor to higher union positions, to depart the
insecure and low-paid milieu of trade-union office for the more lucrative
and higher status world of business enterprise, major party politics, or public
office. It was far from rare for a labor leader to desert his union office for
service as a labor relations adviser to the same employers his organization had
been struggling against. And it was especially common for union officials
repudiated by their members in elections to do so.
Between 1897 and 1914, however, tenure for union officials stabilized and office-holders assumed more professional and bureaucratic styles. That development flowed largely from an enormous increase in total union membership after 1897, especially between 1897 and 1903. In that short period, union membership rose from approximately 400,000 to considerably more than two millions. Along with union growth came steadier sources of organizational revenue from dues and more flourishing treasuries. From their suddenly deep treasuries, trade unions could and did pay officials salaries higher and more regular than workers could ever hope to obtain at their trades. Trade unions now offered better alternative careers than ever for ambitious young men, most of whom still rose directly from shop floor. In this era of second-generation labor leaders, American unions remained marked by an absence of non-working-class types in any leadership positions or staff capacities except for the editors of official journals. Even in that category, however, it was not uncommon for self-taught working-class "intellectuals" to edit the union journal, as the careers of Samuel Gompers, a skilled cigarmaker, president of the American Federation of Labor, and editor of the "American Federationist", and William D. "Big Bill" Haywood, a skilled nonferrous metals miner, secretary treasurer of the Western Federation of Miners, and editor of its journal, "Miners' Magazine", illustrated.5

Although American trade unions and the people who led them in the early twentieth century appeared to assume the characteristics of bureaucracies and bureaucrats, it is essential to stress that these institutions and their leaders were not Weberian bureaucracies or bureaucrats. In a quite real sense American-style trade unions bore a greater resemblance to United States type political parties than to ideal-type modern bureaucracies. On this point, I would again like to read from Hardman: "The Union is the queerest compound of contradictions. It is supposed to be nonpolitical, if not apolitical. Why, it is the most political of all things!" Hardman wrote those words in 1928. Twenty years later the sociologist C. Wright Mills said almost the same thing. "The union world is a world of political machines," wrote Mills. "The labor leader is a machine politician."6

Like established American political parties, trade unions organized their daily institutional lives around the spoils of office and patronage. Those in power conferred loaves and fishes on their subalterns in the form of appointments to paid office and all-expenses paid trips to union conventions. Like American politicians, trade union leaders concentrated more energy on building effective electoral coalitions than elaborating programs for the transformation of society, economics, and politics. Moreover, as high officials constructed their patronage empires and electoral coalitions, they also widened the institutional gap between those holding national office and their appointees (headquarters staff, organizers, and field representatives) and union locals and their officials. The leaders of national and international unions used their powers of patronage, purse, and press to accomplish their goals. Appointment to office went only to union loyalists who toed the institutional line and carried the leadership's message faithfully to the rank and file. Union presidents did not hesitate to
use official funds to buy votes and curry favor among the membership. And union journals simultaneously publicized the accomplishments of incumbent administrators while denying space to voices of opposition. Wherever unions enjoyed a large membership base, practiced productive collective bargaining with employers, and benefited from rising dues payments (as was the case in the building trades and among coal miners after 1898) union leaders used patronage, purse, and press to build political machines and establish institutional patterns of persistence in office. What Robert Michels wrote concerning European trade union leaders of the early twentieth century was equally true about American leaders of the same era. "The leaders are now differentiated from the mass of their followers," asserted Michels, "not only...as specialists endowed with insight and mastery of routine, but in addition by the barrier of the rules and regulations which guide their own actions and with the aid of which they control the rank and file." 7

Most American trade unions also chose their elected officials and staff officers in a manner quite unlike that of modern meritocratic bureaucracies. In some unions, especially those in the building and construction trades, family proved the firmest bond of office and the strongest cement of loyalty; fathers and sons, uncles and nephews regularly succeeded each other in office and often served simultaneously (the largest building trades union, the United Brotherhood of Carpenters, for example, passed the presidency from father to son; the two held that office for nearly sixty consecutive years). 8 Other unions preferred political families to those based on blood. The United Mine Workers of America perfected the coalition union family, especially during the long tenure of John L. Lewis (1919–1959). 9 A third type of union family was pioneered by the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America, what might be called the affinity family. In the case of this union of immigrant clothing workers, its Jewish–American and Italian–American leaders shared a common commitment to a semi–syndicalist form of social democracy and intense personal bonds which, in one especially prominent case, prompted the marriage of two union leaders. 10

In nearly all these different forms of trade–union official family, absolute loyalty proved itself to be the sine qua non of office. The rise to power of John L. Lewis within the United Mine Workers (UMW) provides one of the best examples of that process of union–building in operation. First, Lewis created a local base of power in the small coal–mining village of Panama, Illinois. There, he, his father, and his several brothers used the support and votes of the great mass of immigrant miners to establish a local base of power. Then using their control of one of the largest single locals in the state of Illinois and also in the Mine Workers’ Union, the Lewis family traded local votes (power) for appointed positions on the AFL and then the UMW staff; John L. Lewis served first as his union’s paid lobbyist in the state capital of Springfield, Illinois; then spent six years as an appointed organizer for the American Federation of Labor; and finally moved from the AFL back to an appointed staff position with the Mine Workers. Between 1909 and 1919, Lewis rose from obscurity to the presidency of the UMW while hardly ever giving his
union constituents an opportunity to vote for or against him. Once firmly established in his union's highest office, the presidency, Lewis used the levers of power to build a monolithic machine. He selected subaltern officials solely on the basis of political calculation and loyalty to the union president. He ran his union much like a "boss" of Tammany Hall, the dominant Democratic party organization in the city of New York. Lewis also lost no time in comprehending the distinction between appointed national staff officers, the swiftest growing sector of trade union leadership, and directly elected local and district officials. Elected officials had divided loyalties, simultaneously beholden to superiors above them and to the rank and file below who chose them as leaders. By contrast, appointed staff members shared an undivided loyalty to those who selected them and paid their salaries. Thus, Lewis and other top union leaders persistently sought to increase the number and influence of staff appointees in contrast to elected local and district officers.11

While Lewis and the leaders of the building trades unions practiced and perfected the dominant pattern of American labor leadership, another group of trade unionists pioneered a different style of union management. These new-style labor leaders came overwhelmingly from the "new unionism" of the immigrant garment trades workers. Mostly Russian-Jewish immigrants with a sprinkling of Italian immigrants, these "new" trade unionists imported a central European style of social democracy to the American labor movement. They appointed "intellectuals" to staff positions in research, education, and publication. J.B.S. Hardman, for example, served the Amalgamated Clothing Workers in a variety of research, educational, and publicity capacities. The garment industry unions also created training institutes and classes for their younger members who sought a career in unionism.

Because the "new unionism" of the garment industry had to function in the same universe as the more conventional American "business unions", its leaders could never resolve a fatal contradiction at the heart of their organizational approach. They never could really decide whether unions and their leaders should function primarily to defend workers within the prevailing system and structure of the economy and society or to transform contemporary realities and, in the process, create "new" trade-union men and women. Hence union leaders sometimes thought of their training institutes and classrooms primarily as agencies to educate a new generation of more skilled business union officials and other times as a means to inculcate the rank and file with grandiose social, cultural, and political aspirations. Union leaders, institute teachers, and rank-and-file participants in labor education persistently debated the vocational versus the intellectual implications of the experience. Scattered evidence even suggests that the membership's response to union-sponsored educational programs divided along lines of gender. Women workers preferred courses which examined literature, music, the humanities and the social sciences, a form of education which would make them fuller and better humans. By contrast, men turned to the same programs for instrumental reasons. Through courses in formal union leadership training (parliamentary procedure, labor economics, contract negotiation, contract administration,
among others), they expected to learn how to begin careers as professional union officials.

Yet in the real world of trade unionism these ambitious males discovered that formal training and education alone did not guarantee staff appointment and certainly not election to office. Quickly, however, they learned that the way to rise in the union and start a career was the old-fashioned way. First, take advantage of training opportunities to distinguish oneself from other ambitious young men; then build a local power base by contesting successfully for office; next trade the votes of one’s local union power-base for favors conferred by the leaders of the national or international union. These were the sorts of union leaders whom Hardman described so well in his 1928 essay, "The Stakes of Leadership". For them, ambition was a real driving force. They calculated, bargained, gambled, bought, and sold. They negotiated deals but never the prerogatives of leadership. "Politics", added Hardman, "is no fitting occupation for saints, and union politics is human politics." "At times knee-deep in the mud of union politics," his new unionists "never cease to think of larger aims and, yes, even ultimates," as befit the products of an educational program run by social democratic intellectuals like Hardman.12

Between 1920 and 1940, a mature labor movement faced the task of supplying and training a third generation of trade-union officials. Despite two decades during which the American labor movement experienced first a substantial decline in membership and influence during a period of economic expansion and prosperity and then the crisis of the Great Depression of the 1930s, no fundamental change occurred in the already established patterns of recruiting and training trade-union officials. Indeed, within the AFL and most of its largest affiliates, an aging national leadership held a firm grip on power. In most unions leaders emerged and rose the old-fashioned way, either through family networks, coalitions of interest groups, or the machinations of union politics. At a time in American society when the modern virtues of professionalism and bureaucratic excellence were more highly prized than ever, few, if any, trade-union leaders had formal training for their official positions.13

Several trade unions, however, had a different conception concerning how union leaders should be recruited and trained. Mostly concentrated among the "new unions" of the clothing trades, their allies in the labor movement left, and friends in the progressive reform community, these people sponsored a college for working people and trade unionists in Katonah, New York. Broodwood Labor College, as the school was known, attracted to its faculty some of the finest academic historians, philosophers, and social scientists in the Northeastern United States. Union officials and labor economists taught the eager students about labor markets, contract negotiations, and collective bargaining. Historians, social scientists, and philosophers taught labor history, social problems, Darwinism, and even Marxism. Theater and dance companies introduced young workers both to high culture and popular culture. Brookwood sought to train a new generation of trade-union men and women who would
have the intellectual, cultural, and administrative resources to make the labor movement the seedbed out of which a better society might emerge.14

Strange as it may seem the experiment in labor education conducted at Brookwood by the labor left of the 1920s precipitated an internal conflict in the American labor movement. The old guard officials who dominated the AFL and most of its larger affiliates, especially those in the building trades, looked askance at a labor college which taught not only parliamentary procedure and collective bargaining but also history, social science, and philosophy. The old guard charged the sponsors and faculty at Brookwood with teaching atheism (in the guise of Darwinism), subversion (in the form of Marxism), and dual unionism (in the form of industrial unionism). As a result of such charges, the executive council of the AFL formally repudiated Brookwood and ordered all the federation's affiliates to cease sponsoring, subsidizing, and sending students to the labor college. Henceforward the barons of labor remained suspicious of all labor education programs not directly and totally controlled by unions and which taught such potentially subversive subjects as history, philosophy, and the arts.15

One change in union leadership that began to occur increasingly in the 1920s and more rapidly thereafter has been scarcely studied. By and large, the highest elected officials in the labor movement remained people, nearly all men, who had risen from the shop floor and lacked substantial formal education. These union leaders received generous salaries, large expense accounts, and enjoyed long tenures in office. With their comfortable incomes, they provided their own children with formal and often professional educations. The sons of trade union leaders who had law degrees or undergraduate and graduate degrees in economics and industrial and labor relations went to work for their fathers' organizations as staff counsels, economists, researchers, and organizers. And sometimes they rose from staff positions to high elected office in the unions they served. This proved one way twentieth-century American trade unions could adapt to the demands of an increasingly organizational, bureaucratic society without disrupting a tradition of union history in which family ties and forms of absolute loyalty served as prerequisites for leadership.

For a brief time, however, the Congress of Industrial Unions (CIO) and its brand of new industrial unionism appeared to represent a temporary break with the dominant pattern of union leadership recruitment. It also seemed partly to recapitulate for the new unionists of the 1930s the experience of the years 1870–1900. Simply through the fact of organizing new workers in industries previously nonunion, CIO offered different sorts of people an opportunity to emerge as union officials. Because CIO made a real effort to recruit workers of east and south European extraction as well as nonwhites and women long neglected by mainstream AFL unions, it developed new leadership cadres. Because many of the new industrial unions were exceedingly unstable in their early years and lacked adequate financial resources of their own (dues-paying membership fluctuated with extreme irregularity), many officials had short tenures in office or quickly became servants of established
old-style labor leaders. All things considered, the remarkable aspect of leaders and officials in the new CIO unions was how like they were to AFL officials in terms of social origins (ethnicity aside), education, age, and family behavior. Perhaps more politically progressive and organizationally militant than their run-of-the-mill AFL counterparts, CIO officials were nevertheless not otherwise notably distinguishable.\textsuperscript{16}

World War II and the immediate postwar years ushered in a new universe of trade unionism. For the first time in its history, the United States not only enjoyed mass industrial unionism concentrated in the towering heights of the economy but also a form of mass unionism that proved exceptionally stable, practiced normal collective bargaining, and was imprisoned in an intricate and formal web of legal contractualism. In all aspects of its operations, the mature American labor movement found itself under the sway of the sweeping authority of the law.\textsuperscript{17}

Such a labor movement more than ever needed the services of professionals in the fields of law, economics, and industrial relations. It found such servants among the graduates of the older and newer university schools of industrial and labor relations. Such schools could be found in all regions of the United States and in public and private institutions of higher learning, however different their precise origins. The school at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, for example, owed its origins to the reform tradition pioneered in labor economics by John R. Commons. In its post–World War II phase, however, it added a trade-union sponsored School for Workers to its more conventional university operation. By contrast, at Princeton University and the University of Chicago, the programs owed their origins to Rockefeller Foundation funded schemes of industrial relations that were part and parcel of the nonunion, new welfare capitalism of the 1920s. A third variant could be found at the New York State School of Industrial and Labor Relations (Cornell University) which owed its birth mostly to the political influence of organized labor in New York state.

Whatever the precise origins of these different schools of industrial and labor relations, by the mid-1950s they all shared a common intellectual perspective and an equally common mission in the real world. Based on the assumption that the post–World War II system of American industrial relations and collective bargaining approached institutional perfection and eliminated the need for trade unions built on the class struggle, these schools taught their students how to administer such a harmonious system from either the union or the management side of the bargaining table. For unions they supplied a trained, educated staff of administrators at home in a milieu of complex labor law, stable collective bargaining, and advanced contract administration.

However, in thinking of union officials trained at university, the word staff must be emphasized. In most national unions and also the AFL–CIO, elected officials wielded real power. With few exceptions, most of them were still chosen the old-fashioned way: family connections, coalition and patronage.
politics, and the power of the union machine provided the most common avenues to high union office. With one fundamental difference in the post–World War II era, however. Formal education and certification, especially training in the law assumed a new salience. Rich Trumka, the current president of the UMW, for example, not only spent time as a working coal miner but also holds university and law school degrees. Sol Chaiken, president of the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union through the 1960s and 1970s, like Trumka, had a law degree. Lynn Williams, president of the United Steelworkers, seems more at home with books, ideas, and learned associates than any of his predecessors; and Lane Kirkland, president of the AFL–CIO, is the first person in that position to have had experienced formal post–secondary school education.

The quite real differences between national and local union officials still merit a few words. Most national officers remain as secure in office as ever whereas local union officials continue to inhabit a world of unstable tenure and high turnover in office. National leaders enjoy generous salaries and relatively unlimited perquisites; local officers have far more limited material rewards. The leaders of labor use staff attorneys and economists as well as executive secretaries and secretarial pools to carry on union business. Elected local officers face endless demands on their time without the administrative services available to their superior brothers and sisters. They must answer their own phones, manage most of their own correspondence, and administer their locals, resorting to the services of union lawyers and economists only in exceptional circumstances.

Today with the American labor movement having experienced nearly two decades of continuous decline and facing one of the gravest crises in its history, it must grapple with a growing gap between leaders and led and an inability to attract the "best and brightest" to union staffs. Most graduates of the nation's Industrial and Labor Relations Schools now go to work for corporations which practice the new union–free style of industrial relations or enter law school and afterward serve union–breaking firms. The minority of unions which have run their own training–education programs for members, like the Ladies' Garment Workers and the Amalgamated Clothing Workers, are among those most rapidly losing members and influence. In those two unions and others, moreover, the gap between the ethnoracial composition of the labor force and that of the union leadership has widened immeasurably. How many prominent Afro–, Hispanic–, or Asian–American labor leaders can one name? The charismatic few are gone – A. Philip Randolph, for example – or are in remission – Cesar Chavez. Who will succeed them, and when?

In 1985 the AFL–CIO released a special report on the changing structure of the labor force and the crisis of trade unionism. It included all kinds of suggestions for revitalizing trade unionism and attracting more members among what it characterized as a postindustrial labor force. Yet, as I read the document, it seemed to evidence minimal concern about innovations in the training and recruiting of union leaders.
As far as I can see, which may not be especially far, the AFL-CIO provides no national policy or program for the training of the next generation of American labor leaders. Each affiliated union continues to make do as it pleases. A plethora of approaches to the recruitment of union officials exists in the contemporary United States, but family connections, patronage, and power remain the keys. As C. Wright Mills wrote more than forty years ago, "The union world is a world of political machines; the labor leader is a machine politician."  

Footnotes


4 On the rapid turnover among early union officials and the chaotic organizational milieu in which they operated, see Van Tine: Labor Bureaucrat (footnote 2), esp. Chapters 1–4; on the lure of politics, see David Montgomery: Beyond Equality: Labor and the Radical Republicans, 1862–1873, New York 1967, pp. 208–215; on the general cultural values which prompted labor leaders to behave in such a manner, see S.M. Lipset: First New Nation (footnote 1), pp. 175–190.


W. Van Tine: Labor Bureaucrat (footnote 2), Chapters 4–5, remains the best treatment of that development. But J.B.S. Hardman in Labor Dynamics (footnote 3), C.W. Mills in New Men of Power (footnote 2) and David Brody in Career Leadership (footnote 1), all touch on aspects of the same process of politicization in trade unions. See also Robert Michels: Political Parties, Glencoe/IL 1949, p. 301.


M. Dubofsky (footnote 5) and W. Van Tine: Lewis (footnote 9), esp. Chapters 2–4, 6.

J.B.S. Hardman, Labor Dynamics (footnote 3), pp. 160–161. This and the other essays in the collection give one a good idea of the character and dynamics of the "new unionism".

Again the essays in J.B.S. Hardman: Labor Dynamics (footnote 3), are extremely revealing. But see also E. Ginzberg: Labor Leader (footnote 2), p. 62.


E. Ginzberg: Labor Leader (footnote 2), pp. 50–62; C.W. Mills, New Men (footnote 2), by contrast, sees sharp differences between CIO people and AFL leaders in terms of age, education, and administrative style — CIO officials were younger, better educated, and more bureaucratic — and great similarities in terms of social origins (Chapter 4). For an appraisal closer to that of Ginzberg, see Walter Licht and Hal Seth Barron: Labor's Men: A Collective Biography of Union Officialdom during the New Deal Years, in: Labor History, 19 (Fall 1978), pp. 532–545.

