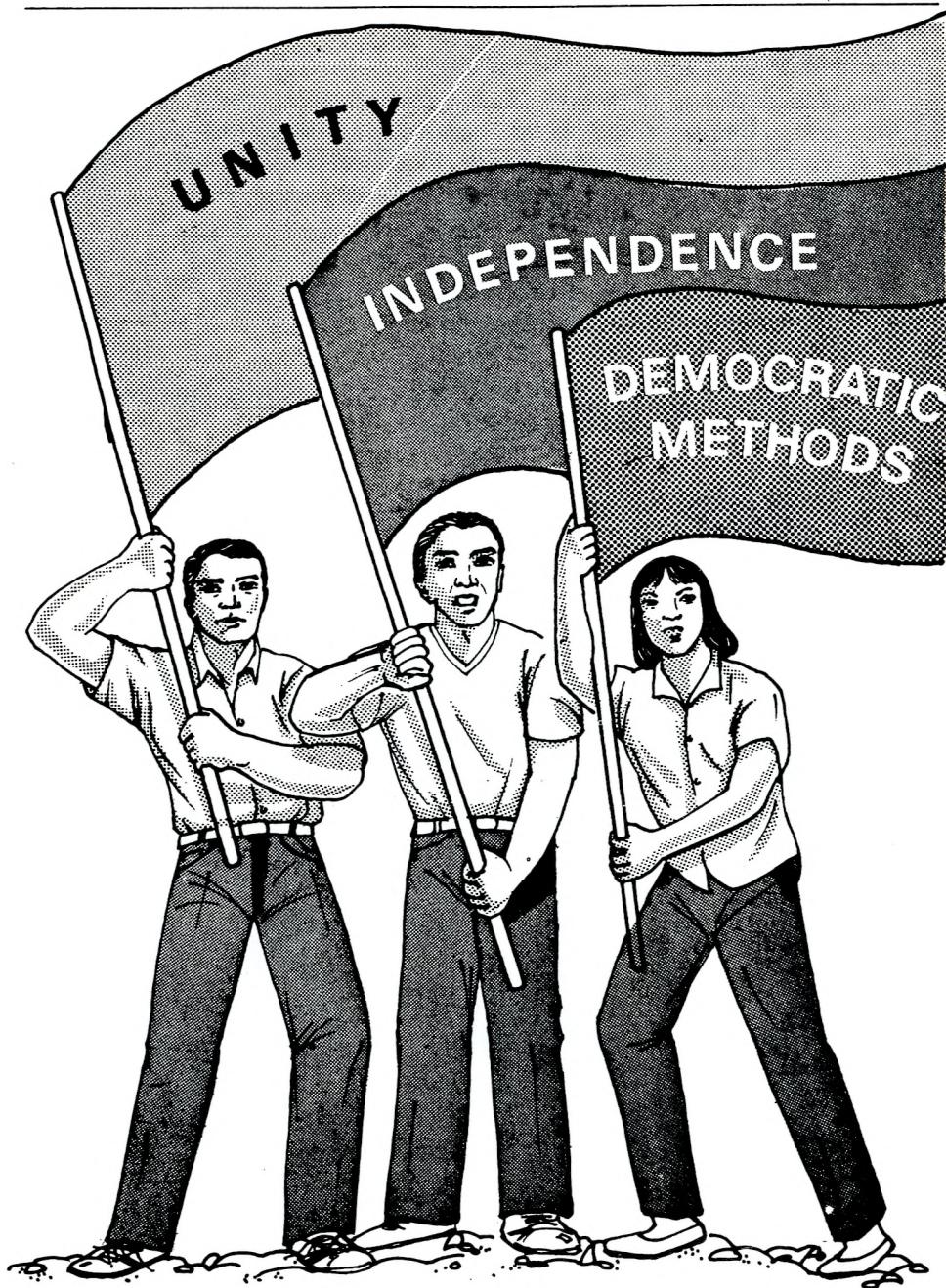


# Three Important Principles for Trade Unionism



## THREE IMPORTANT PRINCIPLES FOR TRADE UNIONISM: UNITY, INDEPENDENCE AND DEMOCRATIC METHODS

### A. Unity

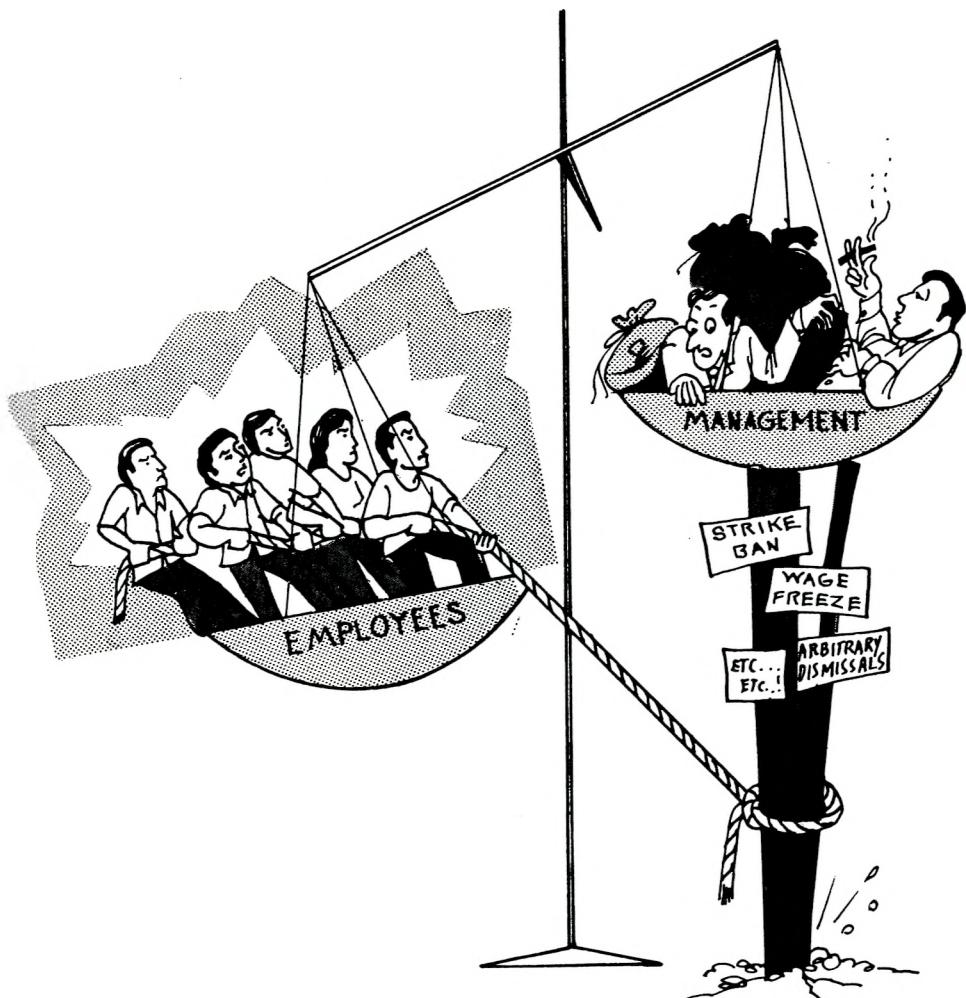
**The first principle of trade unionism is unity: the unity of workers, or put another way, solidarity, "one for all, all for one."**

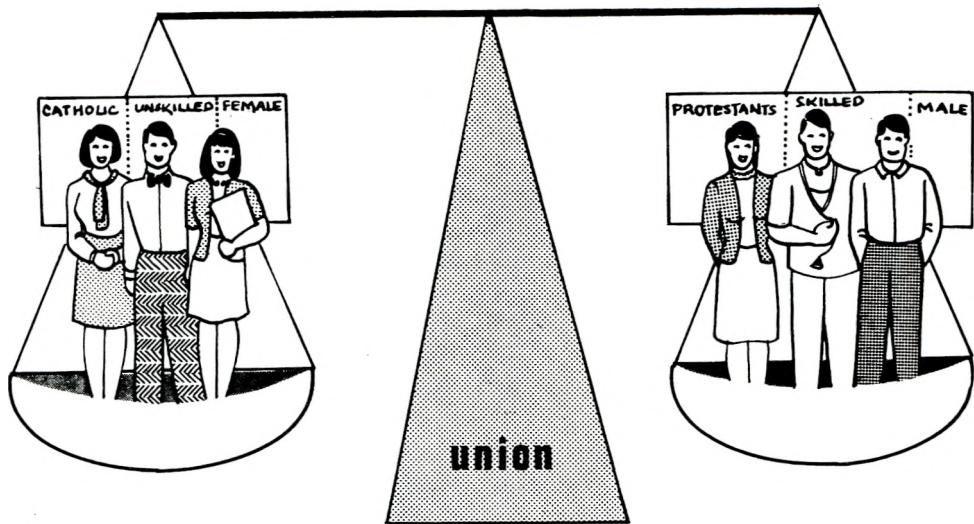
With solid unity, many things can be achieved by the workers. Without unity, nothing of significance can be achieved by an individual worker.

What this means in practice is: the organizational objective of a union is **100 percent membership**.



The strength and influence of a trade union in its relationship to employers depend on the extent the employees of the company concerned are unionized. The higher the proportion of unionized workers to non-unionized workers, the greater the strength. Apart from numbers, strength also come from organizing the key, skilled workers in the enterprise.





Depending on what the basis of organization of the union is—whether it be craft occupation, a specific industry, an undertaking, a common employer or general labor—all workers should be united into one union, irrespective of race, religion, creed, sex, skill, etc. All are equal in the eyes of the organization.

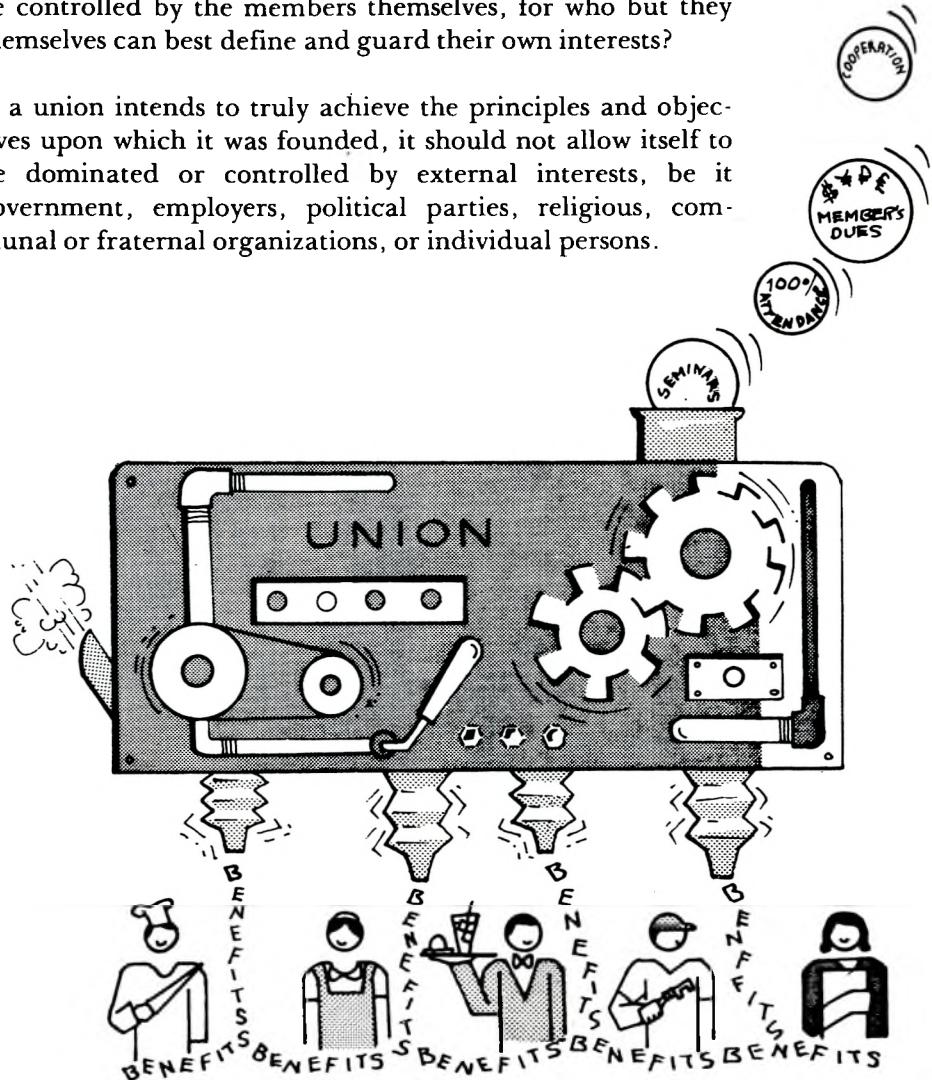
Trade unions should also operate **nationally** because local or regional unions cannot develop sufficient bargaining power or competence over a whole range of issues to adequately safeguard the interest of workers.

Trade unions should not be considered as closed societies. They should not be an instrument of privileged or elite workers, jealously guarding member's privileges against non-member workers who receive lower wages and are unorganized. They should be open to all workers, otherwise, these same underprivileged workers could be used as scabs against organized workers in the event of a serious conflict.

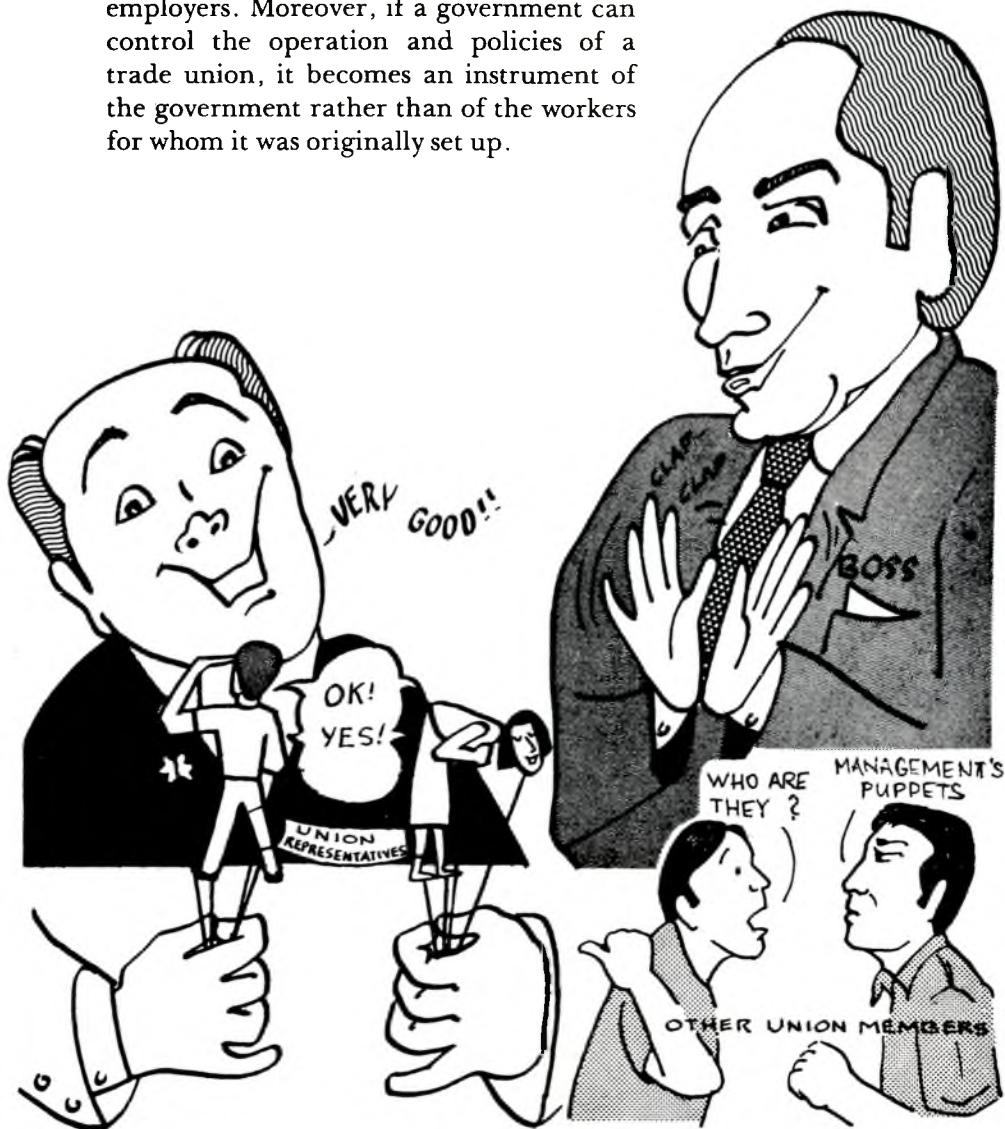
## B. Independence

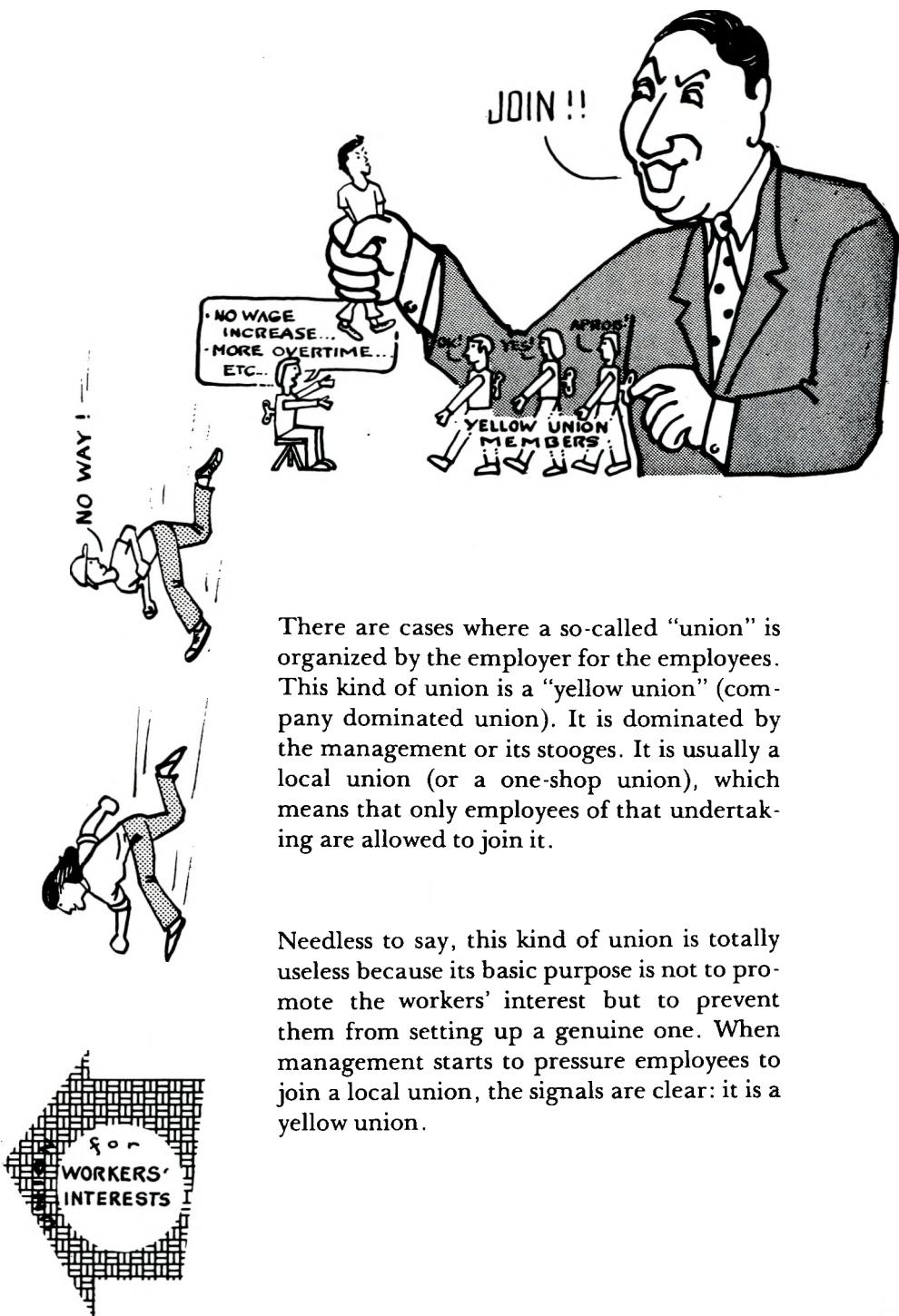
If an organization is to serve the needs of its members, it must be controlled by the members themselves, for who but they themselves can best define and guard their own interests?

If a union intends to truly achieve the principles and objectives upon which it was founded, it should not allow itself to be dominated or controlled by external interests, be it government, employers, political parties, religious, communal or fraternal organizations, or individual persons.



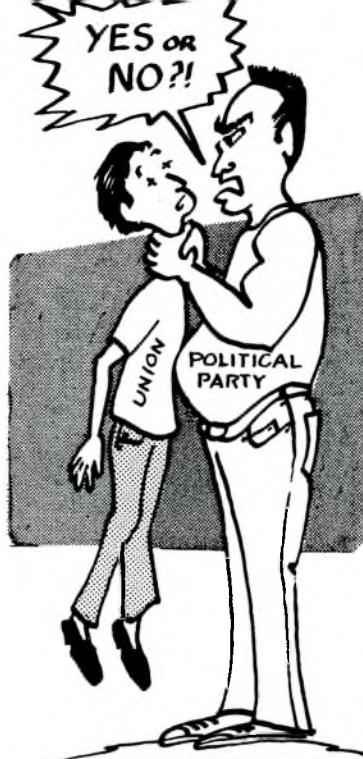
A government may or may not be well disposed to trade unions, but in general, it is very responsive to the interests of the powerful groups in society, usually the employers. Moreover, if a government can control the operation and policies of a trade union, it becomes an instrument of the government rather than of the workers for whom it was originally set up.





There are cases where a so-called "union" is organized by the employer for the employees. This kind of union is a "yellow union" (company dominated union). It is dominated by the management or its stooges. It is usually a local union (or a one-shop union), which means that only employees of that undertaking are allowed to join it.

Needless to say, this kind of union is totally useless because its basic purpose is not to promote the workers' interest but to prevent them from setting up a genuine one. When management starts to pressure employees to join a local union, the signals are clear: it is a yellow union.



Equally, the union should resist any attempt by any political party to control and dominate it. The interests of the political party are not necessarily the same as those of the union. Even if there are some areas of shared interests, the ultimate aim of a trade union is to serve its members. This aim may be distorted under the domination of a political party whose basic aim is to obtain support from all sectors to secure power.



Occasionally, a union may face attempts by religious or communal groups to subject it to their control in order to serve the latters' religious or sectional interests.



If this happens, the union will be weakened as it will inevitably be divided by the attempt of one group to seek hegemony (controlling influence) over all the others. Such hegemonic operations are anti-union as they encourage one worker to fight another rather than concentrate their energies on the employers.

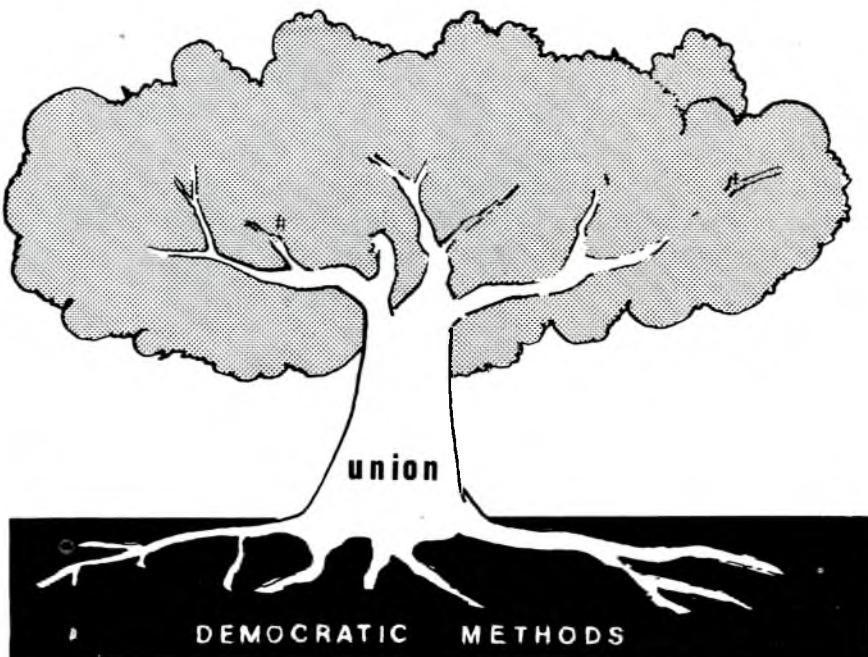
Individual members of unions are, of course, completely free to practice whatever religion or to accept whatever political creeds they wish, but they should not seek to impose their personal beliefs on the organization nor cause the organization to be subject to such non-trade union principles.

Let us discuss the problems at the union meeting today!

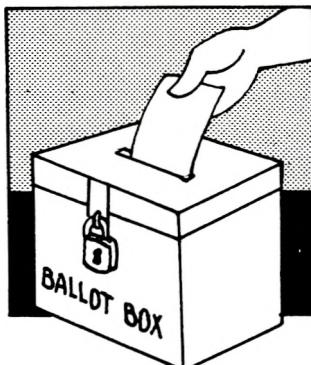
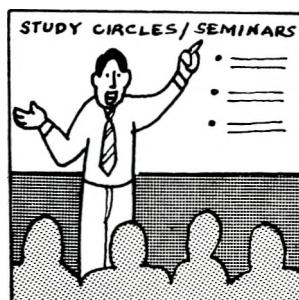
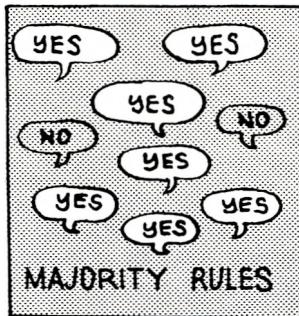
### C. Democratic Methods

A trade union cannot be effective in fulfilling the wishes of the members unless it is a voluntary association of workers with common interests, i.e., to secure higher pay and better working conditions. Voluntary organizations cannot be strong and effective unless there is wide and deep participation of members in its activities and struggles.

Participation can only come about if the organization is a democratic one. Hence, democracy is an essential pillar of unionism.



In practice, democratic methods mean, broadly, the following:



1. All sections of the membership should be fully and fairly represented in the decision-making process. The aimed-for result should be to express the genuine will of the majority of members on any issue.
2. Members shall have the priority right to be educated about the union's rules and constitution to enable them to participate fully in the union's decision-making process.
3. All members shall have the same rights and privileges as well as duties and obligations.
4. Representatives, executive officers and others should be elected by secret ballot periodically by and from among the members and be answerable to them. Never should they be appointed by one person only.



5. Activities should be communicated to all members and be subject to periodic review by the members.

Traditionally, trade unions have always been a very democratic institution. This is so because there is no other effective long-term way of functioning. Thus, it has been said that trade unions are a modernizing force because, as a democratic institution, they are in reality a popular school of democracy (particularly in underdeveloped societies seeking modernization).

## **DISCUSS**

1. The five points mentioned above.
2. Do you have other opinions regarding democracy in a trade union.?

# **Union Structure**

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## **UNION STRUCTURE**

How a union is structured determines the following:

- How decisions of the organization are made;
- How members are represented in the decision-making bodies;
- How the membership is mobilized to confront problems.

In general, there are five levels:

### **1. The Delegates' Conference or Congress**

This is the supreme decision-making body. Here, all the members are represented by their elected representatives. Its functions are to make the broad policy decisions, elect officers and members of an executive council, review past activities and lay down guidelines for future activities.

A delegates' conference may be held once in every two, three, four or five years.

## 2. Executive Council or Executive Committee

This body is usually elected at the delegates' conference. It represents the whole membership and meets to take important decisions and to supervise the work of the executive officers.



## 3. Administrative Committee

Instead of vesting all powers of decision on a single person as the president or general secretary in between meetings of the executive council, a small mobile group of principal officers of the union is vested with the power of collective decision and responsibility. It is usually a small group of people who are in close contact with each other.

#### 4. The Executive Officers

The Executive Officers are the President, the General Secretary, the Treasurer, etc.

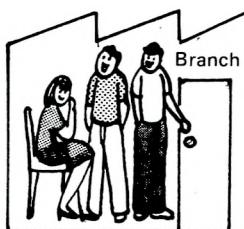
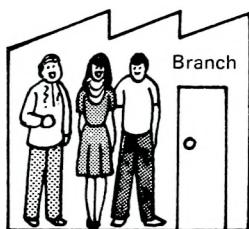
The Executive Officers are in some unions elected by the Delegates' Conference, in other unions elected by the Executive Council.

#### 5. The Branch or Local

The Branch is the basic unit of the trade union organization, and it maintains the closest contact with rank-and-file-members.

Organized either on the basis of where members live (e.g. a regional branch, an area branch or a district branch) or where they work (e.g. X, Y, or Z factory branch), the branch is the source of trade union activities and vitality. It is usually administered by an elected branch or worksite committee and its usual activities are: Grievance handling, Education, Organizing new members, Enforcing collective agreements, etc.

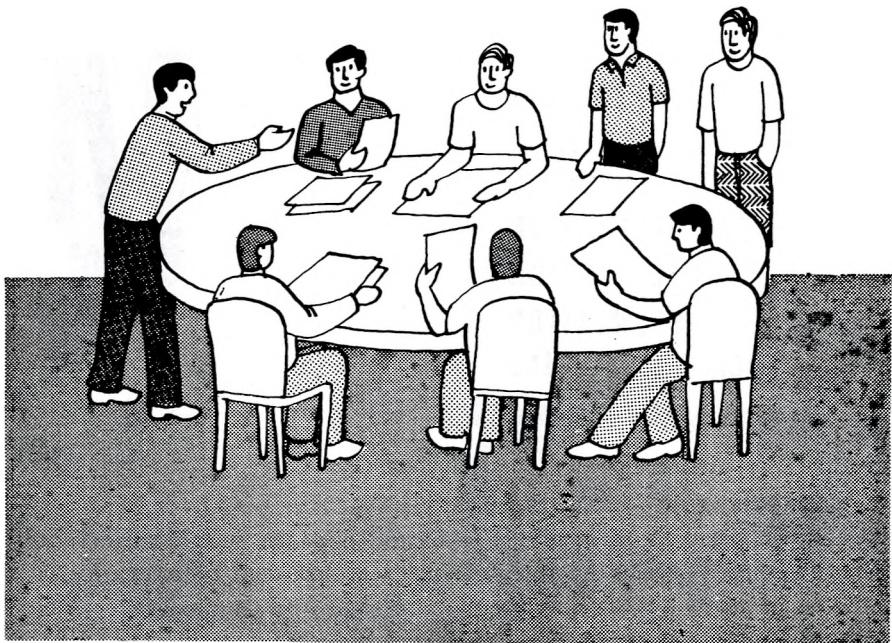
Collective bargaining with employers is usually the function of the headquarters and not the branch.



## DISCUSS

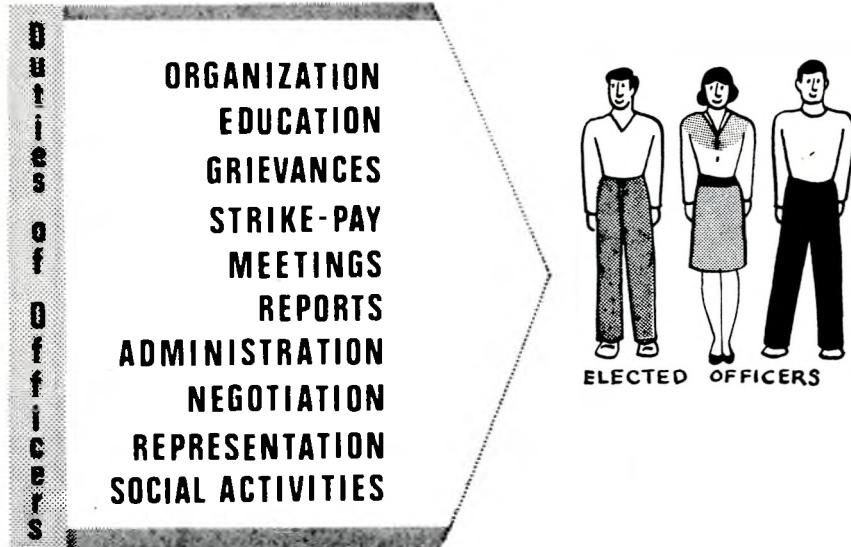
1. What are the objectives of your union?
2. Who has the right to join the union?
3. Do you as an individual member have any influence over decisions taken by the union?
4. Compare the described organizational structure with the one actually being implemented in your own union.

# Administration



## ADMINISTRATION

Having set up a union to protect and promote their interests, it is now up to the members to see to it that their union can work continuously and effectively.



The members must elect responsible and capable people to serve as officers. They must continue to keep a watchful eye over the elected officers to check against negligence and to ensure that policies which have been democratically laid down are seriously pursued.

The administration of a union depends not only on the executive officers, but also, and more importantly, on the members themselves. Members need to keep the executive officers informed of their problems. They should be conscious of what the union and the officers are doing or not doing.

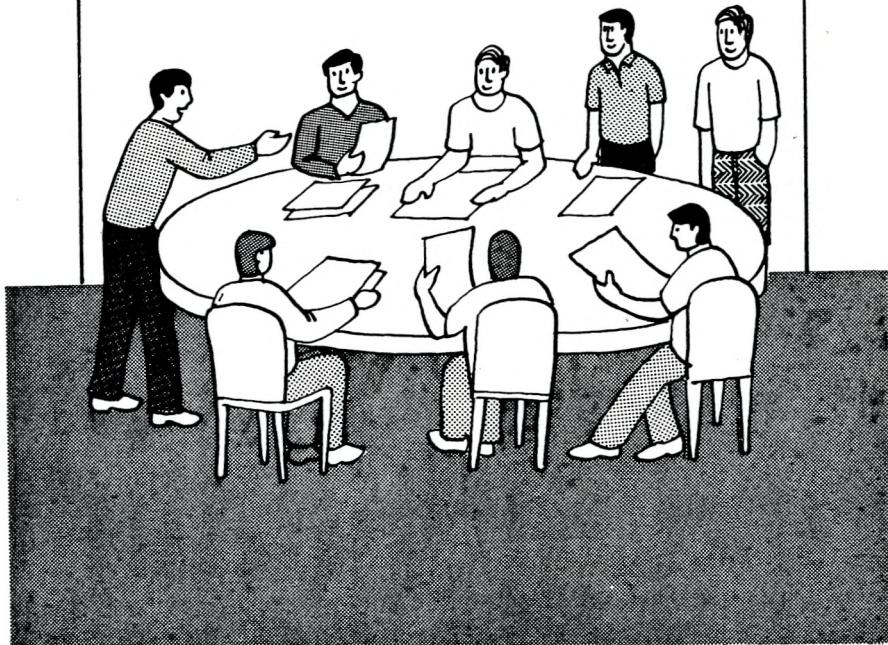
**The members will ultimately get the union they deserve**



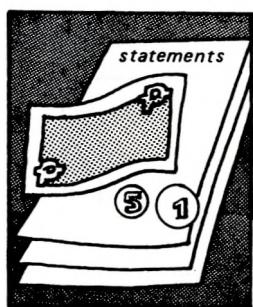
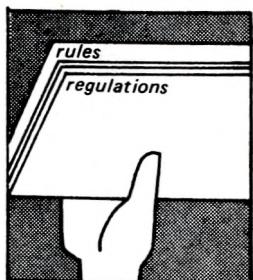
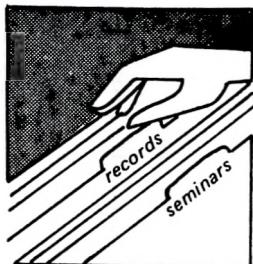
**WRONG CONCEPTS  
ABOUT UNION LEADERS**

The administration of a union is carried out by the elected officers responsible for the various tasks that have to be performed. They should not avoid the responsibility of submitting all their actions and decisions to the members for review. In fact, they should encourage all the members to do this, as participation of the members in all aspects of the union's activities, including its administration, is important for the strength of the organization.

Elected officers should submit their actions and decisions to the members for review.



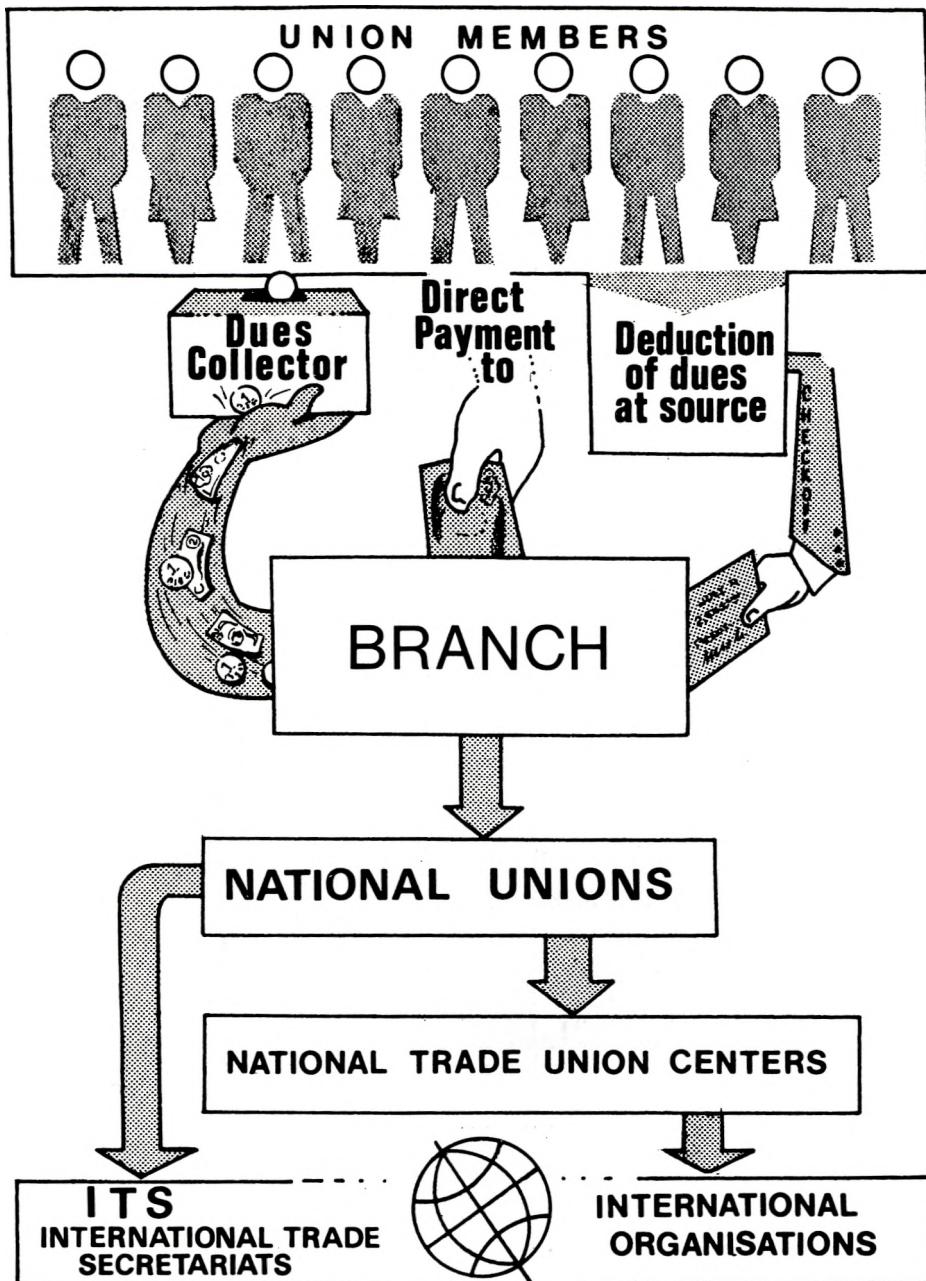
Basically, administration of a union consists of the following functions:



1. **Keeping records of meetings and decisions of the union's governing bodies;**
2. **Adherence to the rules of the organization as regards meetings, obligations to report to the appropriate responsible bodies within the organization, and general union accountability;**
3. Adherence to and execution of policies and decisions made by the various decision-making bodies of the union;
4. Collecting dues, keeping financial records, and managing the funds of the union;
5. Following of government regulations on the operation of trade unions, e.g., filing annual financial reports and membership figures, logging minutes of elections and strike votes, etc.

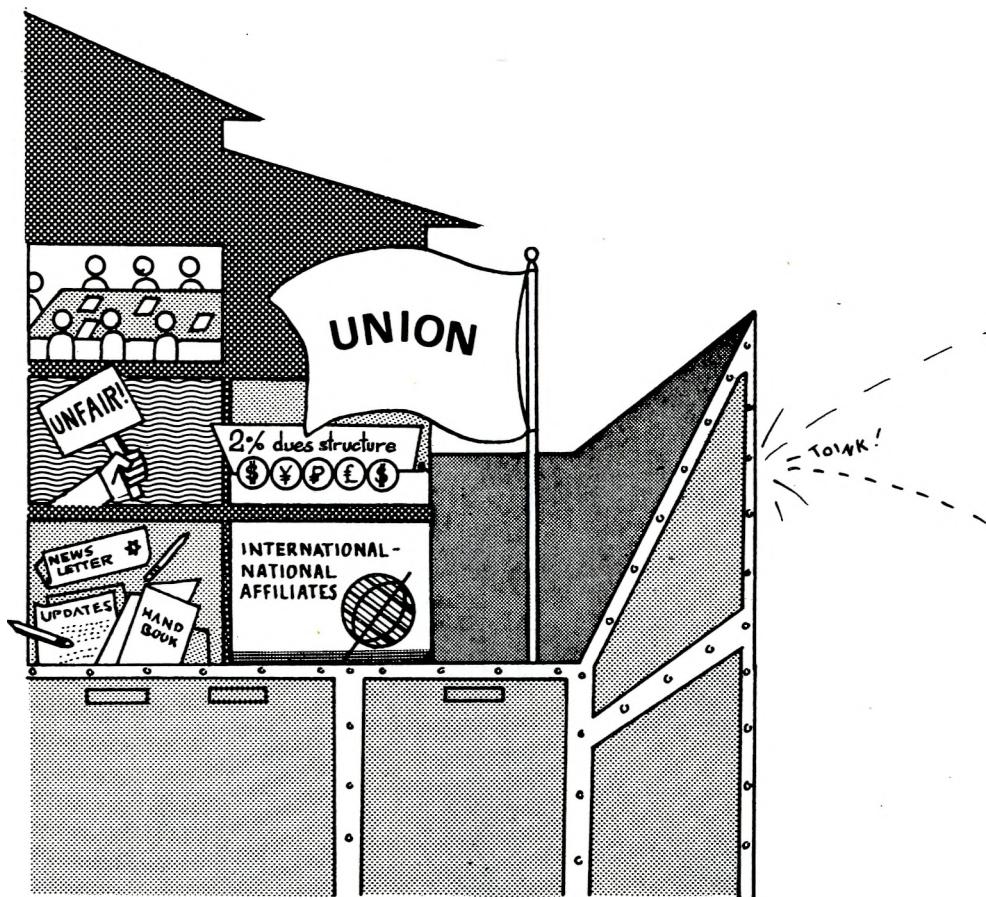
## DISCUSS

In your opinion, who is responsible for each point (1-5) mentioned above?



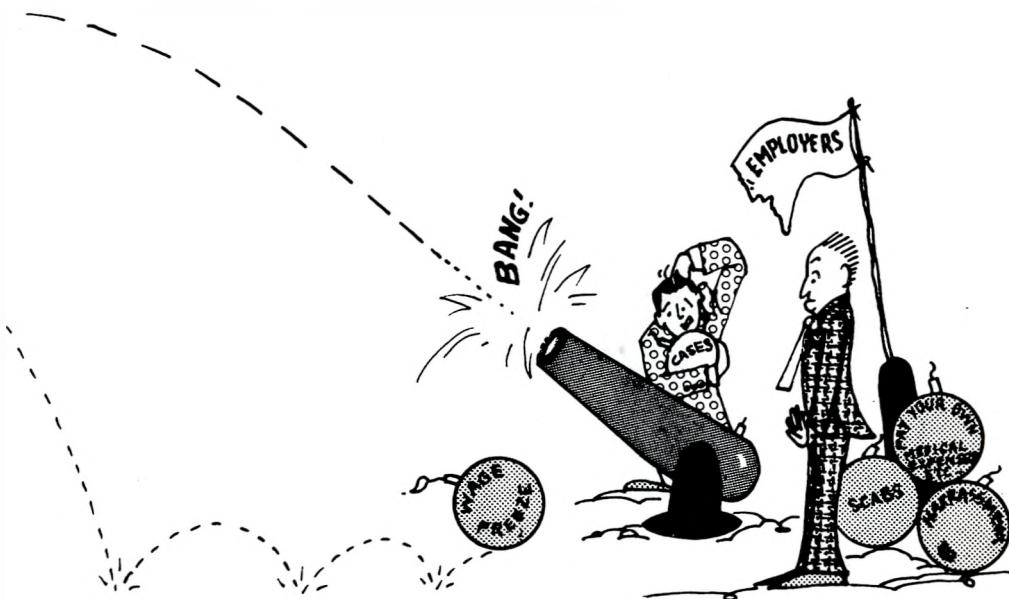
## FINANCE

There are some workers who think that it is enough to come together to wage a struggle only when there is a major problem, such as securing better wages. They see permanent organization in a negative way and therefore refuses to support the building up of a permanent organization. However, they will contribute generously when a struggle is on.



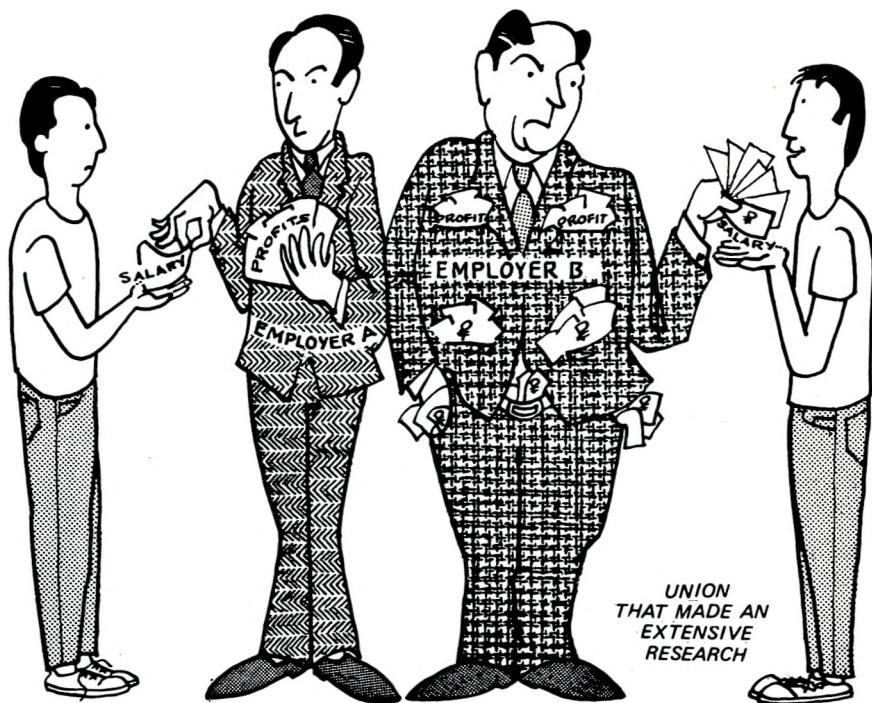
Experience has shown that this is wrong and that the lack of a permanent organization tends to breed problems, whereas the existence of a powerful, permanent organization tends to discourage employers from creating problems. Moreover, it is usually too late to think of organizing a union when the big problem has arrived on the doorstep. This is like looking for the insurance agent when a fire has started in the house.

There are other workers who do not see the union as having any work to do except to periodically negotiate agreements (which they think can be done by voluntary workers); to handle a members grievance (which they also think can be done by voluntary unit councilors or officers); to maintain some administration work, the bulk of which, it is sometimes felt, could again be done by volunteers. Hence, they conclude that the union should not collect anything but token dues and other assessments from members.

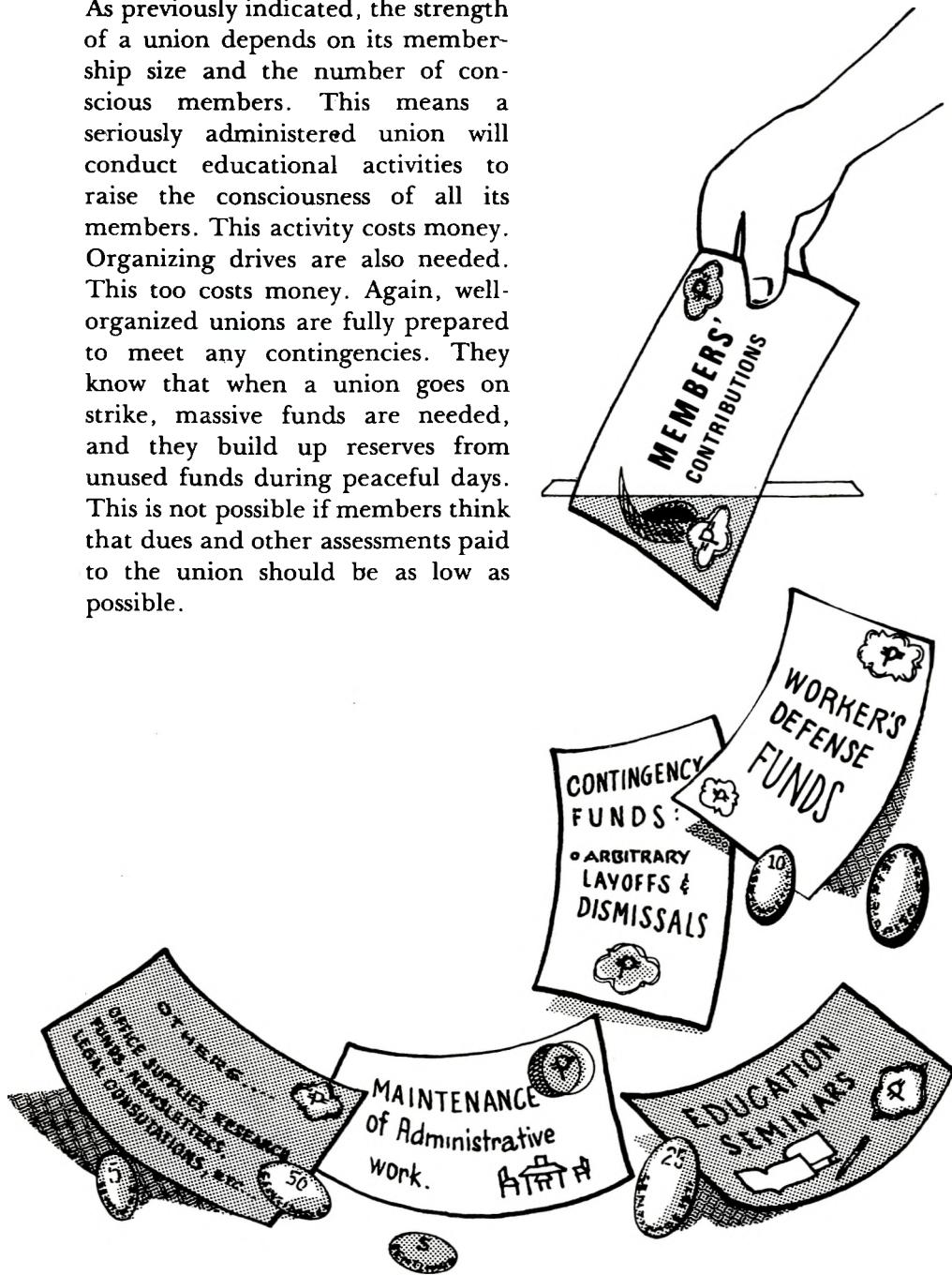


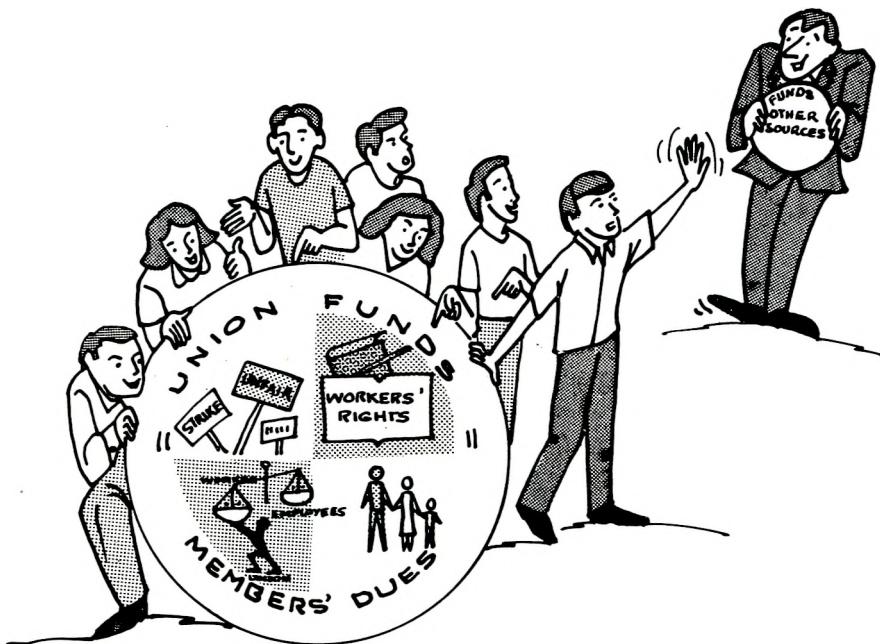
There are two broad questions to be considered here. First, the range of a union's activities. Second, the use of a volunteer versus a professional (or employed person).

Depending on how a union looks at the objective (purpose), the amount of effort it puts into this activity varies. For example, some union officials make little or no preparation for negotiation and aim merely at going for a 5 or 10 percent wage increase over the previous agreement. On the other hand, some make extensive research into ascertaining the maximum the union can get from an employer; they find out thoroughly the employer's ability to pay.



As previously indicated, the strength of a union depends on its membership size and the number of conscious members. This means a seriously administered union will conduct educational activities to raise the consciousness of all its members. This activity costs money. Organizing drives are also needed. This too costs money. Again, well-organized unions are fully prepared to meet any contingencies. They know that when a union goes on strike, massive funds are needed, and they build up reserves from unused funds during peaceful days. This is not possible if members think that dues and other assessments paid to the union should be as low as possible.





Finally, to be independent from employers, government and political parties, other groups and individuals, the union's finances should be derived solely from the members and not from any outside sources. The saying: "Who pays the piper, plays the tune" is true. A union that accepts money from sources other than its membership for its operation must necessarily, sooner or later, play according to the command of the paymaster.

Therefore, it is important for all rank-and-file members to understand why they have to pay dues and other assessments in order to make them understand that they should constantly be informed of the way in which the funds are utilized. It's one of the members' rights in a democratic organization.