

A workers' guide to bureaucracy

Or anyone in a movement which should be fighting, but isn't

You might have noticed that though trade unions are supposed to be workers' organisations, they don't always act like it. You've probably noticed this first in a contrast between the energy, bravery and camaraderie of a campaigning organisation of grassroots union members at your place of work, and the general apathy, cowardice, inertia, incompetence and paternalism of higher levels of the union. The point of this guide is to explain why something that should be so good got messed up, and what to do about it.

What bureaucracy is

When we say 'bureaucracy' here, we don't just mean something like 'administration' or 'officers'. We're using the word to refer to a political phenomenon that has reoccurred in almost every campaigning and political organisation for the last couple of centuries or so. The bureaucracy is *primarily but not exclusively* a section of an organisation which develops priorities, interests and experiences distinct from, and often opposed to, the ordinary members of the organisation. The mindset of bureaucracy is more or less that a small section of participants in an organisation (i.e. the bureaucrats) have the right and the duty to look after the interests of ordinary people (e.g. union members) by taking decisions and doing things for them, because the ordinary people aren't capable of taking those decisions, and doing those things, themselves. The rank and file are the sheep, and the bureaucrat is the shepherd. So the first thing that 'bureaucracy' refers to is a set of people who enshrine this particular mindset. They may think they have your best interests at heart, but basically, they think you're an idiot (even if they talk about democracy a lot). This set of bureaucrats isn't necessarily the same as the full time employees and official place-holders of the organisation – some of these people resist the temptation to adopt the bureaucratic spirit.

The second thing 'bureaucracy' refers to is a tendency in the ideas and behaviour of people who you might not want to call 'bureaucrats'. In fact, it's often a strong tendency amongst rank and file union members, and amongst union activists and reps. It may even be a tendency in your own ideas or actions (don't worry, if it is, that's not your fault, it's quite normal, and it's something you can easily sort out). Even organisations without fully fledged bureaucrats can have bureaucratic tendencies. This tendency is simply towards the mindset of the bureaucrats themselves – i.e. that it's good to have people take decisions and do things on behalf of others. (That's not the same as getting on with taking a decision when only a minority of union members turn up to an open meeting – that's always going to happen sometimes, even though you do your best to increase turn out.)

But what do I mean that this mindset manifests itself across all layers of the union? Well, plenty of union members accept that other people negotiate their deals every year that aren't grassroots union members and aren't independently elected. And accept that they have a right to sign or recommend a deal, Plenty of people don't get involved in taking union action even though they think it's a good thing, or value the outcomes it generates. This might seem harsh, but these sorts of things express the latent idea that it's ok for some people to systematically take decisions or act on behalf of others. That doesn't mean that if you've got a lot on you're doing a dreadful thing by not going to a union meeting, or that people can't have different ways of getting involved – far from it! The point is just about, when push comes to shove, if ordinary rank and file members don't take responsibility for being the organisation, others will.

As you can see, bureaucracy is not the same as organisation. You can be in favour of organisation, but against bureaucracy. Bureaucracy is a risk within organisations, not an inevitability.

How bureaucracy happens

So we saw above that one seed of bureaucracy is bureaucrats or others not trusting ordinary members of the organisation; and that another part of it is the disengagement which reflects some degree of affinity with that belief among ordinary movement members.

The odd thing is that then a vicious circle sets in. The few people who are engaged (even if only because they're paid to be engaged) are taking decisions i) in isolation from the grassroots members and ii) on the basis that those grassroots members aren't capable of motivating themselves, taking their own decisions, and taking effective action. So the few people, be they 'bureaucrats' or otherwise, start to get it into their head that if they don't take decisions or action, no one else will. And of course, the sorts of decision or action that you can take if you're just a few people in a head office somewhere are pretty limited – you can't go on strike on behalf of other people in a factory. You can't call a demonstration if you can't have some belief that people will turn up – much less can you organise an occupation of a building. If you call an open meeting of union members at a site, and only three of three hundred people show up, you pretty much can't organise anything there and then other than a polite letter to management. If twenty people turn up, maybe there's enough energy to organise a petition, maybe fifty could start organising a strike – and if two hundred or more turn up, you can call a strike starting the next day!

The point of all this is that the strength and depth of participation determines the levels of decision that can be taken, and low participation corresponds to weak action. That is why bureaucratised organisations are associated with negotiation, lobbying, writing detailed research reports, and issuing press releases. And that is why engaged, excited organisations are associated with strikes, demonstrations, carnivals, etc. The vicious circles continue – because it's mostly the engaging sorts of organisation that succeed in winning, and hence being relevant to their members, and hence encouraging the engagement which keeps them out of the vampiric clutch of the bureaucracy. In order to survive while bureaucratising, organisations who can't organise collective struggle take to offering other things – like the various discounts and ephemera that unions offer to members.

A quick note on the state, the boss, and co-option

Of course, all this doesn't happen to organisations in isolation. The process is encouraged by all sorts of other groups who have interests in organisations like unions being bureaucratised. For example, your boss has an interest in your union being disengaged and bureaucratic, rather than a strong, fighting organisation, which mobilises its members into taking action. It's less of a threat to them! And the government would prefer than unions in general are like this, because lots of strikes are politically difficult to deal with. So they've got all sorts of tricks up their sleeves.

One of these is granting privileges to movement bureaucrats, to placate them personally and bolster their position amongst their membership. So governments grant special rights to workers who join unions, and bosses give paid time off to stewards. Governments agree to talk with the bureaucrats, thus making it look to the casual observer that they give a fig. They don't, but by looking like they do, they give the impression to everyone that it's worth hanging in there with the bureaucrats, and not organising something more dangerous. (This isn't a conspiracy theory, and it's not to say the people involved in this process aren't sincere – they are. But part of their sincere beliefs is that what they do is the best that can be done, because ordinary people aren't capable of organising either practical resistance, or an alternative of their own.) The bureaucrats get involved in this process too: union leaders forgot what it was like to be exploited at work long ago. Many of them earn over £100,000 a

year and have lavish expense accounts. In their lives, the experience of power displaces the experience of powerlessness.

The state stretches its tentacles further into the movement. In return for cheap privileges, such as access to government funding (for education, for example) and a statutory process to achieve (toothless) negotiations, the unions are required to accept an explicit role in disciplining workers – with a legal requirement to try to bring workers back off any unofficial strikes.

Some history

We're talking here about bureaucracy in campaigning or political organisations like trade unions, 'socialist' parties, or environmental groups like Friends of the Earth. If you check out the history of any of these organisations, you can see there's a constant running battle between peoples' needs to organise effective action and the bureaucracy. Most often, these organisations get set up in a wave of mass struggle, then they go through a period of co-option and institutionalisation. Then, they either get refreshed and reinvigorated by new waves of struggle, or they get bypassed when a wave eventually rises up that is too strong for them to hold down.

So for example, trade unionism in Britain got its first real kick start with the 'new unionism' of the late nineteenth century. These unions were never perfect, and always somewhat bureaucratic, but they were a start, and everyone knew what they were supposed to be for: fighting. After some surprising initial wins, including the legalisation of strikes and some social legislation, they got lazy. They put their faith in building the labour party, which helped for a bit, in a way. After the hiatus of the second world war, struggle swung up again. Through the sixties and seventies, vibrant rank and file activism ensured that, while far from perfect, the unions were more responsive to members' needs than they are today.

Apart from the carrot, the other side is the stick. Often bureaucracy is encouraged by the other thing that makes organisations seem ineffective in struggle – i.e. being beaten. That's what's happened in the '80s to the labour movement, and as a result the disengagement set in which entrenches bureaucracy. Nothing to be done about that but try to see it doesn't happen.

Equally, this process can be seen with environmental organisations. Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth started off as direct action organisations in the '70s. By the '90s, they'd grown used to getting 'a seat at the table' with government ministers, and deprioritised direct action and political critique. Increasingly seen as ineffective, when a new wave of environmental activism rose up in the '90s, fighting back hard against new roads and airport expansion, they mostly just ignored the traditional organisations. (See a bit more below on why it's easier to bypass organisations like Greenpeace than trade unions.)

It goes for unemployed people's organisations as well. In the '30s in the US, a mass movement of unemployed people rose up to confront the government's management of the Great Depression. Initially successful, it involved mass disruption of local political institutions. Government got scared, and part of their strategy was to offer 'a seat at the table' to national movement 'leaders' – mostly from the Communist Party, as it happens. That was the beginning of the end. The people at the top told everyone it was them who were making change, and the people at the bottom, who should have known better, believed them.

Obviously these are extremely quick outline sketches, but you get the idea – investigate more if you're interested. Thing is, all this matters. It matters because the power of the bureaucracy leads to decisions that are massively detrimental to large numbers of ordinary

people. We already gave some examples, but you can probably think of examples from your own life. Many tenants and residents associations were once vibrant and militant, organising rent strikes which forced the council rent down across London and many other parts of the country. But slowly the state has incorporated them, so they have to agree to be agreeable, or they won't get 'consulted'. Maybe your union carries out one day strikes that aren't much more than symbolic, rather than really fighting to win.

What the bureaucracy looks like now

And so that's how we got where we are today. These organisations' used to be for fighting and now they're not. They still have strands and sections and ideas which are about fighting (which is why they're not entirely pointless), but by and large, they've been 'bureaucratised'. How does the bureaucracy come across to you? Maybe when you go to a union branch meeting, the people sitting at the head of the table have been there for years and years, and the faces in the room are older and less diverse than those in the workforce as a whole (though that doesn't make them bad people). There's probably a lot of rules and regulations, and having to wait for the executive committee to decide something, and talk is about negotiations being done by someone else – not the action which the workers in the room can take themselves. Look at the organisation's website or literature, and the personalities of the leadership will loom larger than the creativity of ordinary members. Articles will be about how clever negotiators are, or how brilliant the government 'recognises' the leadership are.

What to do about it.

1) Don't get bureaucratised yourself

Keep the faith. People (including you) are, basically, quite capable. Even though it's hard to get the lazy so and sos to do anything sometimes, faith in their fundamental ability to do the right thing by themselves, you and each other is the belief which come hell or high water is fundamentally incompatible with bureaucracy. Have faith in them (and you, and us) to win any fight, if they'll fight hard enough, no matter how hard it might seem – as long as your attitude is to incite them, not encourage them to accept defeat, you should be alright!

2) Struggle!

The main antidote to bureaucracy in movement organisations is struggle – getting on with what the organisation is supposed to be doing – i.e. fighting hard for a better life and a better world! That's because, like we saw above, one of the main sources of bureaucracy is disengagement from movement organisations; and people only have a reason to be re-engaged with the organisation if it's doing something relevant. Unions can try and sell cheap insurance scams to their members all they like, but ultimately people aren't fooled. People are normally members of unions and similar groups because they want stuff to change. So get on with that change (inside the group or outside it), and watch the new waves of interested people refresh the organisation and re-align its practice with their interests!

3) Control the struggle!

Like we said above, if people don't take decisions together, it's much harder to struggle effectively – to do things like big strikes, occupations, etc. The best way to get round that is to get as many people together. Car park, canteen, nearby pub or community centre, wherever. Take a decision as quickly as possible, and think about electing a few people (who you can un-elect at any time) to help you carry it through. This is the opposite of letting

an appointed union official run things. The more people involved, and the more democratic, the better. If there's an ongoing issue, such as a strike, hold regular open meetings.

4) Recognise that the bureaucracy isn't just a problem of bad leaders – it's a thing about structure!

Sometimes, people respond to this whole bureaucracy thing by trying to elect new leaders who'll actually do the right thing. Now, not all leaders are the same, that's true, there are real differences. But, if you're looking for a fundamental shift from the bureaucratic perspective, the solution is not in electing new leaders (even when electing those leaders is combined with an upswing in grassroots struggle). This is because even when those leaders really are different (and often they're just pretending) they quickly find that there's not a lot they can do sitting in a head office somewhere in London. Real struggle is something we have to do ourselves.

That's not to say there is never any point in supporting left candidates in internal union elections. On the contrary, more left-wing leaderships can give space to militant grassroots members to organise. For example, the right-wing leadership of Unison (at various levels) has colluded in the sacking of around a dozen militant activists in the past couple of few years – and those are just the ones we know about. On the other hand, the more left wing leadership of PCS (inadequate though it is) has no record of working with management to victimise grassroots organisers. On a practical level, this sort of difference is real.

5) The power of the bureaucracy in our organisations is mostly ideological

Who's afraid of the big bad bureaucracy? What can they actually do? When it comes down to it, not a lot. Union and movement bureaucracies are primarily effective because people trust them, and put a lot of faith in what they say. So, for example, when workers are striking when the strike hasn't been authorised by the union, the main things the unions do are: i) write to workers, telling them to come back to work and ii) condemn the strike in the press. Likewise, Friends of the Earth might condemn people who got involved in a scuffle on a demonstration, and they can place a few stewards along the route of a march – but it's really only effective to the extent that people place any stock in their authority. (Sometimes it does go beyond this: when things got really intense in the class struggle in some countries, unions arranged heavies to beat up radicals – but that's not so much an issue for us now.) So, because the power of bureaucracy is a figment of their own imagination, it's really important to...

6) Make sure others understand the bureaucracy

So when the letter comes through the door, or they see that report on telly, they won't be surprised. And they won't somehow give up all hope, because they think the spokesman really represents the rest of the people who're part of their movement, or think that somehow 'cause some suited official has said a strike should stop, it should. It shouldn't! A general understanding of the bureaucracy should also prevent people from being sucked into schemes to elect some brand new leadership as an alternative to mobilising struggle.

7) Neither the union or union membership are sacred – but leaving or being anti-union isn't the answer; only collective solutions help!

You've probably got the idea now that the organisation isn't the point, struggle is, real democracy is, and not only that, but it seems that organisations have this tendency in them which means that bits of them try to hold struggle up. But on the other hand, organisations are useful for struggle – as long as they stay focussed on fighting. That's a pretty difficult paradox to handle, practically, right?

Sometimes, people are tempted to leave the organisation, and suggest that others do the same. They see all that's wrong with it, and think that leaving it will help. It won't – at least not as an individual step. Leaving as an individual doesn't help anything. Look at what happened with the Labour Party when people realised it was shit. People left in ones and twos, and did nothing in particular instead, and the party kept on drifting to the right. Leaving a bureaucratic union doesn't make your work any likely to be better. What you need to do is either revitalise the organisation that's there, or set up a parallel organisation of people who also see the need to start getting things done – like a rank and file workers group, cutting across boundaries of union membership, for example. It doesn't have to be a formal organisation, or have a name, but it does need to organise. If people haven't realised that they can't trust the bureaucracy (see the last point) then the whole fiasco will repeat itself when people build themselves a new organisation later (the current one having failed when everyone's left), and sleep walk into the same traps. The same thing goes if a few people set up an alternative organisation with the aim of it being 'non bureaucratic'. Unless they simultaneously manage to ignite mass collective struggle, disengagement and bureaucracy will follow.

Break away in some non-union movement organisations is different. Because unions are organisations with very high levels of membership and respect among some sections of the working class, and because they're about *unity*, not just the action of any willing people, it's worth having a certain degree of respect for the stock others place in them. But in, for example, environmental campaign groups with very diffuse membership and low levels of commitment, it's much easier to say you can just break away and start something more interesting.

But even amongst workers, when the level of struggle reaches a certain pitch, a collective break of some sort becomes almost inevitable. The unions cannot contain the level of struggle necessary within their walls – as mass assemblies take and immediately implement decisions, and delegates are elected or recalled by the day or week, the apparatus built up through years of mediation is made redundant. Simultaneously, the identification which that apparatus has fostered with the state brings the official leaders into conflict with the workers. At some point, this conflict must find some terms for its expression, or else be resolved in the direction of official authority. At that stage, a collective break is the positive alternative, and if the union remains active, it does so in open conflict with workers.

Alternative forms of struggle emerge. These include the “factory committees” and “workers’ councils” which characterise many revolutionary upheavals – in which mass assemblies decide action together, and elect recallable delegates to help implement them.

8) The spirit of bureaucracy is not just in our own organisations – it's everywhere, and it's the enemy!

So like we said, bureaucracy is just believing that other people can't achieve things for themselves, together. The bureaucrats think they're capable, and everyone else isn't. When you think about it, it's amazing how many institutions and features of our society are based on this very simple belief. Like, how we couldn't have a more democratic political system, because we need ‘strong leadership’. Or how in the company, the owners appoint managers, rather than you electing someone who you all respect for their work and character. Anyway, that's just a thought for another day...

Hope that helps. **Keep on fighting.**

This guide was produced by a member of The Commune, a group standing for workers' self-management and communism from below.