

# The Union Convention: An Examination of Limitations on Democratic Decision Making

## Les obstacles à la démocratie dans les congrès syndicaux

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### Résumé de l'article

Dans cette étude, l'auteur se demande dans quelle mesure les décisions prises dans les congrès syndicaux peuvent être démocratiques. Il s'agit d'un cas type: le 31e congrès du Syndicat des employés du gouvernement de la Colombie Britannique tenu au mois de juin 1975.

Dans la première partie de son exposé, l'auteur passe en revue les recherches scientifiques qui ont été effectuées sur le sujet. Selon ces recherches, plus les congrès se tiennent à intervalles rapprochés, plus la probabilité est grande que les décisions atteintes le soit de façon démocratique. On fait aussi entrer en ligne de compte la durée et le nombre de délégués au congrès. Ainsi, plus le nombre de délégués est élevé, moins ceux-ci ont de possibilités de s'exprimer, plus il leur est difficile de mettre en branle une opposition efficace et organisée, plus facile aussi est le contrôle des mécanismes de procédures du congrès. Les différents auteurs qui se sont intéressés à cette question ont indiqué que ce qui caractérise davantage la valeur démocratique d'un syndicat au cours d'un congrès, c'est la possibilité d'en établir les politiques et la facilité avec laquelle les délégués peuvent faire connaître l'opinion des membres qu'ils représentent.

En ce qui concerne les délégués, on sait généralement assez peu de choses au sujet de leurs antécédents; fonctions syndicales, expérience de congrès antérieurs, caractéristiques démographiques, etc. En règle générale, les délégués appartenant à des sections locales importantes jouent un rôle plus grand dans le déroulement d'un congrès que les délégués provenant de sections locales moins fortes.

Un autre aspect qui peut indiquer le caractère démocratique d'un congrès, c'est la façon dont on dispose des résolutions qui peuvent être soumises par les sections locales ou la haute direction du syndicat, résolutions qui souvent sont peu discutées et qui ont été préalablement passées au crible par un comité spécial.

Ce rappel fait, l'auteur décrit comment il a procédé à son enquête. Des questionnaires ont été adressés à tous les délégués inscrits au congrès et 126 d'entre eux sur un total de 216 ont retourné le questionnaire dûment rempli. Les faits relatifs au choix des délégués, à la formation des comités, au but du congrès, au mode d'examen des résolutions ont été tirés des statuts et règlements du syndicat. Pour apprécier la vigueur des débats et l'importance de l'opposition relativement aux résolutions, l'auteur s'en est remis au procès-verbal du congrès en classant les résolutions suivant qu'elles n'ont donné lieu à aucune, à peu ou à une grande opposition.

Quant au questionnaire, il demandait si les délégués s'étaient sentis libres de voter selon leur choix, s'ils ressentent l'importance du congrès dans l'élaboration de la politique du syndicat, si les membres des sections locales étaient satisfaits des décisions prises au congrès. Le questionnaire demandait aussi certains renseignements touchant le délégué et la section locale à laquelle il appartenait.

L'auteur fait ensuite part des résultats de son enquête. Inutile d'insister sur la désignation des délégués, si ce n'est que, dans plusieurs sections locales, ceux-ci sont choisis uniquement parmi les membres du bureau de direction. Quant aux caractéristiques démographiques des délégués, qu'il suffise de rappeler qu'ils sont âgés de quarante ans en moyenne, que 87% d'entre eux sont des hommes, qu'ils sont membres du syndicat depuis sept ans et demi, que 63% d'entre eux ont déjà fait partie d'un autre syndicat, que 87% occupent un poste dans leur section locale, que 60% en étaient à leur premier congrès. Les résultats indiquent que les délégués, en très grande majorité des hommes, sont plus âgés que la masse des syndiqués, font partie de l'association depuis plus longtemps qu'eux et qu'ils sont la plupart du temps des dirigeants d'une section locale.

Pour les délégués, l'objectif majeur d'un congrès doit résider dans l'élaboration des politiques du Syndicat. Les délégués estiment aussi le congrès comme la Tribune où les délégués peuvent exprimer l'opinion de leurs mandats. On perçoit aussi l'élection du bureau de direction comme une des tâches importantes des délégués.

L'auteur explique ensuite la procédure qu'on suit dans la présentation des résolutions au congrès. Il note que seulement 36% des délégués sont intervenus dans les débats portant sur les résolutions et qu'aucune des recommandations présentées par le comité des résolutions n'a été battue. Il n'y eut véritable débat que dans environ 5% des cas. De plus, 57% des résolutions ont été adoptées sans débat ni opposition. La discussion varie selon la nature des questions débattues. Sur les sujets où il y eut certains débats et quelque opposition, il y en avait plus de la moitié dont le rejet était recommandé par le comité des résolutions. Par contre, là où l'adoption était recommandée et qu'il y eut opposition, presque la moitié de ces résolutions avaient été soumises par le bureau de direction, 15% étaient des résolutions modifiées et 7,8% (une seule résolution) portait sur l'augmentation des cotisations. D'autre part, une analyse plus approfondie indiquait que près de la moitié des résolutions débattues avaient trait à des modifications aux statuts et trois d'entre elles visaient à accroître les pouvoirs de l'organisation centrale.

Au sujet des résolutions, il était demandé aux délégués s'ils étaient assez bien informés pour voter de façon intelligente. Sur ce point, les réponses données furent positives et les délégués, qui avaient reçus des directives de leurs mandats, étaient les mieux informés. Sur ce point, les délégués se disent bien informés, plus ils se sentent libres de voter comme ils le voient et plus ils considèrent le rôle du congrès dans l'élaboration de la politique du Syndicat. Cependant, les délégués qui avaient reçus des directives de leurs mandats se sentaient moins libres de voter à leur gré et ils paraissaient moins satisfaits d'avoir apporté au congrès une participation véritable.

Une limitation sérieuse au principe de décisions prises démocratiquement réside dans les pressions qui peuvent s'exercer sur les délégués au moment du vote parce que ceux-ci se prennent à main levée. Ainsi, le délégué hésitant est enclin à se ranger du côté de la majorité. Les répondants se disent peu influencés par ce genre de pressions. On reconnaissait, toutefois, que les recommandations du comité des résolutions pouvaient influencer leur vote, constatation qui est confirmée par le fait qu'aucune des recommandations du comité ne fut rejetée.

Par ailleurs, les délégués, qui étaient les mandataires d'un groupe professionnel donné, étaient placés ensemble au congrès. Plusieurs délégués ont noté à ce sujet que des tactiques manifestes avaient été utilisées pour empêcher des individus de parler ou de voter de « la mauvaise manière ». La moitié des délégués ont reconnu avoir subi ce genre de pressions, ce qui est une entrave à la prise de décisions démocratiques.

On a aussi retenu un dernier point: l'influence des permanents du syndicat pendant le congrès. L'auteur cite l'exemple de l'intervention du secrétaire général du Syndicat pour appuyer une recommandation du bureau de direction visant à la centralisation des négociations collectives.

En conclusion, l'auteur remarque que le congrès n'est qu'un des aspects de l'action démocratique à l'intérieur des syndicats et que la tenue de congrès fréquents n'est pas la garantie d'une action vraiment démocratique. Plusieurs activités antérieures à la tenue même des congrès, comme le choix des délégués, le choix des membres du comité des résolutions, l'accès des délégués aux divers comités du congrès et les pouvoirs de ces comités sont autant de domaines qui peuvent influencer sur les caractéristiques de la démocratie syndicale. Au cours du congrès lui-même, l'importance des débats doit retenir l'attention. Il ressort de ce qui précède que plusieurs facteurs peuvent nuire à la prise de décisions vraiment démocratiques. Il est possible que les délégués ne représentent pas vraiment les sections locales. On peut retenir encore que, si l'on ne considère pas le congrès comme un moyen d'établir les politiques du syndicat, celui-ci n'est pas en mesure de remplir ses fonctions, qu'il n'y a que peu de débats approfondis touchant les résolutions, que l'influence du comité des résolutions est de nature à fausser le caractère démocratique du congrès que, même avant la tenue du congrès, des forces peuvent s'exercer qui limitent la liberté d'action des délégués, que, pendant le congrès, nombre d'influences sont de nature à entraver également leur liberté et que, enfin, les permanents syndicaux peuvent de leur côté jouer un rôle décisif sur les décisions qui sont prises.

# The Union Convention

## An Examination of Limitations on Democratic Decision Making

**John C. Anderson**

*This article examine a series of factors which may limit the existence of democratic decision making within the union convention.*

Industrial relations theory and research have stressed the vital role played by the convention in the government of national unions. The union meeting in convention has been depicted as a constitutional assembly, a legislative body, a final court of appeals, a nominating and electoral congress, and as a forum for the review and evaluation of past policy and performance.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, the convention itself has been identified as one of the cornerstones of national union democracy. As Leiserson pointed out: « Though a representative body, the typical convention is identified with the union itself as if it were a general meeting of all members. »<sup>2</sup> Given the importance of the functions performed by the convention, the degree to which democratic decision-making occurs within the convention would appear to be vital to the existence of national union democracy. This article examines a series of factors which may limit the existence of democratic decision making within the union convention.

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<sup>1</sup> For a description of the functions of the national convention see: William LEISERSON, *American Trade Union Democracy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1959), pp. 122-145.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 122.

## REVIEW OF PAST RESEARCH

Very little empirical research has focused on the union convention when compared with other aspects local or national union democracy.<sup>3</sup> However, the work which has been done suggests some of the important dimensions to consider when analyzing democratic decision-making within and across conventions. The most frequently cited concern has been the time between formal conventions. The more often conventions are held, the greater the opportunity for members to directly impact union policy, constitution, and leadership. Several studies have examined the frequency of conventions as well as the possible factors which may influence frequency. Bambrick and Haas analyzed 194 union constitutions and discovered that CIO unions were more likely than AFL unions to hold national conventions in periods of two years or less. Larger unions were also less likely to hold annual or biennial conventions.<sup>4</sup>

Marcus extended the above research to include age of the union, subgroup representation on the executive board, and membership restrictions, in addition to size as possible determinants of convention frequency.<sup>5</sup> The results suggest that larger unions, older unions, and unions without subgroup representation (geographic, occupational, sex) on executive boards were likely to meet less frequently. The number of restrictions on union membership was not related to convention frequency. Edelstein and Ruppel replicated Marcus' study (and used it for comparison) with a sample of British unions and failed to find any relation between subgroup representation or age and convention frequency.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, the British data revealed an opposite association between size and frequency; larger unions were more likely to hold biennial conventions. Although the research reviewed indicates some of the characteristics associated with frequent conventions, little is re-

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<sup>3</sup> See William FAUNCE, «Delegate Attitudes Toward the Convention in the UAW,» *Industrial and Labor Relations Review*, XV (July, 1962), footnote number 2, p. 463. No change in the state of the art has occurred since this time.

<sup>4</sup> James BAMBRICK and G. HAAS. *Handbook of Union Government, Structure and Procedures* (New York: National Industrial Conference Board, Studies in Personnel Policy, 1955), pp. 78-81.

<sup>5</sup> Philip MARCUS, «Union Conventions and Executive Boards: A Formal Analysis of Organizational Structure,» *American Sociological Review*, XXXI (January, 1966), pp. 61-70.

<sup>6</sup> J. D. EDELSTEIN and H. J. RUPPEL, «Convention Frequency and Oligarchic Degeneration in British and American Unions,» *Administrative Science Quarterly*, XV (March, 1970), pp. 47-56.

vealed about the extent of democracy surrounding the actual convention proceedings. Or as Marcus intimates the more basic question concerns the control over the internal dynamics of the convention.<sup>7</sup>

Two other characteristics of the convention have been raised as concerns for national union democracy: convention size and duration. Several authors have commented on the trend toward small conventions (in terms of number of delegates).<sup>8</sup> The larger the convention, the less the opportunity for individuals to participate in the process; the harder it is for challengers to mount effective and organized opposition; and the greater the potential for control by the administration of convention proceedings. With large conventions, facilities must be booked years in advance and extensions in duration may be virtually impossible. Thus, the time allotted to convention proceedings must be adequate to allow all business to be transacted. However, in many conventions the limited amount of time available may be filled up with speeches, ceremonials, and social events. All of which tend to limit the ability of the convention to act as a democratic assembly.

Perceptions of delegates of the purpose of national conventions have also been examined as indicators of democracy.<sup>9</sup> Faunce administered questionnaires to all delegates in attendance on the second day of the 1959 UAW convention. Response patterns which would support the existence of democratic decision making were examined. Viewing the convention as important in determining union policy was considered a prerequisite to having a democratic convention. Over ninety percent of the delegates considered the convention as very important in determining union policy. A second criterion used was the direction of communication. The fact that the flow of communications upward to the national union was rated as a more important purpose of the convention than «making sure that members back home are informed about UAW policies» was identified as another indicator of convention democracy.

Authors have also delineated the selection of convention delegates, the distribution of delegate entitlements to locals, and the characteristics of delegates as important factors to be considered in assessing the probability of democratic decision-making. Faunce asked the delegates what proportion of the local membership voted in the delegate

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<sup>7</sup> MARCUS, *op. cit.*

<sup>8</sup> LEISERSON, *op. cit.*, pp. 122-145.

<sup>9</sup> FAUNCE, *op. cit.*, p. 469.

elections to check on the extent of their representativeness.<sup>10</sup> Others have discussed whether the delegates are elected from the local membership in general or from within the local executive.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, authors have questioned whether limitations on delegate eligibility are too extreme to permit adequate representation of the local membership.<sup>12</sup> Thus, prior to the convention, the process by which delegates are selected should be adequate to guarantee representation of major interest groups within the local.

Local entitlements to delegates and votes have also been a topic of concern. Leiserson presents the problem as the ability to balance representation between small and large locals while at the same time maintaining a reasonable overall size of the convention.<sup>13</sup> The balancing may be important given that locals of different sizes may have different interests and since small locals are less likely to send representatives to conventions. In one article, Faunce reported that delegates from large locals were more likely to submit resolutions; have delegates in attendance; and view the convention as important in the determination of policy.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, delegates from larger locals were more likely to speak on issues, oppose national officers, attend caucuses, and be more aware of pressures from national officers. Conversely, delegates representing smaller locals were less likely to have received instructions regarding resolutions and therefore, felt less bound by any instructions. The author concludes that large locals contribute more to national union democracy. However, it also emphasizes the importance of constitutional provisions relating to delegate entitlements and their implications for democratic convention decision-making.

Stieber points out that little is known about the delegates in terms of their union offices, occupations, years of membership, previous convention experience or other demographic characteristics.<sup>15</sup> Rothbaum raises the same issue in relation to whether the average delegate may be considered a union professional or a lay member.<sup>16</sup> One of Michels main

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 465-468; LEISERSON, *op. cit.*, p. 129.

<sup>11</sup> Sam ROMER, *The International Brotherhood of Teamsters: Its Government and Structure* (New York: Wiley and Sons, 1962) pp. 13-15.

<sup>12</sup> LEISERSON, *op. cit.*, p. 129.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 128.

<sup>14</sup> William FAUNCE, «Size of Locals and Union Democracy,» *American Journal of Sociology*, LXVII (November, 1962), pp. 291-298.

<sup>15</sup> Jack STIEBER, *Governing the UAW* (New York: Wiley and Sons, 1962), p. 17.

<sup>16</sup> Melvin ROTHBAUM, *The Government of the Oil, Chemical, and Automic Workers Union* (New York: Wiley and Sons, 1962), p. 157.

contentions is that over time union leaders and members become increasingly different in terms of their characteristics and attitudes.<sup>17</sup> Thus for a convention to be truly representative (in Michels' sense) delegates should approximate their membership in characteristics and attitudes. The amount of delegate turnover has been taken as one indicator of delegate representativeness.<sup>18</sup>

Decision-making within the convention is based on majority voting over resolutions. Resolutions may be presented by locals or the union executive prior to convention, or by delegates from the convention floor.<sup>19</sup> Each of the case studies of union government has discussed the extent of discussion and opposition.<sup>20</sup> Debate has been characterized as vigorous, although varying by issue<sup>21</sup> or without organized opposition. «There are conventions in which the delegate body is not much more than an audience registering approval of programs presented by the officers while it is being [socially] entertained.»<sup>22</sup> This quote appears to be applicable to the majority of conventions discussed in the literature.<sup>23</sup>

Several reasons have been suggested for the lack of vigorous discussion over resolutions. First, recommendations for concurrence or non-concurrence are made by the various committees appointed by the national executive. These committees are likely to represent the interests of their appointers. Allen also points out that delegates are easily swayed by the emotional appeals of staff or executive or by their superior knowledge as specialists.<sup>24</sup> Faunce discovered that instructions from locals or pressures exerted by the national executive may limit discussion.<sup>25</sup> The use of rules to limit debate has also been a subject of concern.<sup>26</sup> A great deal of controversy has arisen over the rights of

<sup>17</sup> Robert MICHELS, *Political Parties: A Sociological Study of the Oligarchical Tendencies of Modern Democracy* (New York: The Free Press, 1962).

<sup>18</sup> STIEBER, *op. cit.*, p. 17; ROTHBAUM, *op. cit.*, pp. 157-158.

<sup>19</sup> Lloyd ULMAN, *The Government of the Steel Workers' Union* (New York: Wiley and Sons, 1962), p. 104; Mark PERLMAN, *Democracy in the International Association of Machinists* (New York: Wiley and Sons, 1962), p. 78; ROMER, *op. cit.*, p. 20.

<sup>20</sup> Case studies referred to are the Wiley series: Michael HARRINGTON, *The Retail Clerks* (New York: Wiley and Sons, 1962); PERLMAN, *op. cit.*; ROMER, *op. cit.*; ROTHBAUM, *op. cit.*; STEIBER, *op. cit.*; and ULMAN, *op. cit.*

<sup>21</sup> STIEBER, *op. cit.*, p. 54.

<sup>22</sup> LEISERSON, *op. cit.*, p. 126.

<sup>23</sup> See case studies on unions cited in note 19.

<sup>24</sup> V. L. ALLEN, *Power in Trade Unions* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1954), pp. 110-113.

<sup>25</sup> FAUNCE, «Size of Local,» *op. cit.*, pp. 291-298.

<sup>26</sup> STIEBER, *op. cit.*, pp. 19-25.

staff to attend and vote in conventions. While staff of the steel workers are granted full delegate status;<sup>27</sup> OCAWU staff have the right to voice but no vote;<sup>28</sup> while the machinists encourage staff to stay away from the convention altogether.<sup>29</sup> Thus, not only the composition of delegates and union committees but also pressures exerted by local executive, national executive or staff may limit the amount of discussion and debate over convention resolutions.

Most of the factors presented in relation to convention democracy — frequency, purpose, internal dynamics — have only been the emphasis of single studies or theoretical inquiry. The present research, through description and analysis examines the impact of several of these factors on decision-making within the thirty-first biennial convention of the British Columbia Government Employee's Union in June 1975.<sup>30</sup>

#### METHOD

*Sample*: Questionnaires were mailed to all registered delegates at the convention; along with a stamped return envelope. A total of 126 of the 214 local delegates returned usable questionnaires, a response rate of fifty-nine percent. An examination of the distribution of responses by local and occupational component<sup>31</sup> revealed that non-respondents appeared to be randomly distributed across local and occupational components.

*Measures*: Data on delegate elections, convention committee appointment and composition, delegate entitlements, role of the convention, and resolution submission procedures were obtained from the union's constitution and bylaws.

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<sup>27</sup> ULMAN, *op. cit.*, pp. 106-110.

<sup>28</sup> ROTHBAUM, *op. cit.*, pp. 57-58.

<sup>29</sup> FERLMAN, *op. cit.*, p. 81.

<sup>30</sup> It should be noted that the analysis reported here may not be generalizable to all unions. The convention may play a different role in unions with national versus local labor markets, craft versus industrial versus white collar unions, and private versus public sector unions. In all of these the role of the international, the type of delegates (business agents, elected leaders, or members), and the issues discussed may vary. Therefore, criteria which make a convention appear apparently democratic may not be as important.

<sup>31</sup> The British Columbia Government Employees Union is subdivided into fourteen occupational components, which have locals in twelve geographic regions throughout the province. The component is the unit at which wage and specific benefit bargaining occurs.

The amount of discussion and opposition over the resolutions presented to convention delegates was assessed by direct observation of the convention proceedings. Each resolution was classified as having no opposition, some opposition, or a significant amount of opposition both through debate and voting. This was accomplished by counting the number of speakers for and against the resolution as well as the distribution of votes on each resolution. Observation also provided additional data on the impact of executive, staff and other delegates on the freedom of delegates to vote as they pleased.

The questionnaire included items on perceived freedom in voting, importance of the convention in determining policy, membership satisfaction with convention decisions, instructions from local and component officials, the importance of various purposes of the convention, and perceived pressure on delegates to vote in a certain manner. Individuals responded on six point scales anchored with appropriate polar adjectives. In addition, questions were included to obtain information about the characteristics of the individual and his local.

## RESULTS

*The Convention Delegates:* Representation of locals to the B.C.G.E.U. convention was based on membership. Each local is entitled to one delegate for the first 100 members and one additional delegate for each additional 200 members of major part thereof.<sup>32</sup> The process by which delegates are elected from within the local is established under local bylaws. An examination of bylaws of a series of locals revealed that in the majority of cases delegates were elected from within the local executive rather than the membership as a whole. This is verified by the fact that eighty-seven percent of the respondents currently held union positions. Therefore, although the structure of delegate entitlements allows for equal representation of all locals without restrictions on the maximum number of delegates, the process by which union members become delegates may jeopardize the extent to which the resulting delegates are representative of the local members.

A demographic sketch of the delegates reveals that they are about forty years old; eighty-seven percent male; having been with the union and the provincial government about seven and a half years; sixty-

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<sup>32</sup> *The Constitution and Bylaws* (Vancouver: British Columbia Government Employees' Union, 1974), Article 6, Section 3.

three percent have been members of other unions, and eighty-seven percent hold some elected union position. However, sixty percent were attending their first convention. Thus, the overall picture presented is of an experienced unionist. In order to check their similarity to the membership of the union, the delegates characteristic were compared with a random sample of members from four Vancouver locals.<sup>33</sup> The results indicate that the delegates are on an average older; more likely to be male; have been in the union longer; more likely to have been a union member in the past; and more likely to be a union official. If individual characteristics can be taken as indicative of evidence for Michels<sup>34</sup> gap between the leadership and membership, these findings raise some doubt about the ability of the convention to truly represent the wishes and interests of the unions' membership.<sup>35</sup>

*The Purpose of the Convention:* Faunce argued that for the convention to fulfill its role in union government, it must be viewed as important in determining union policy.<sup>36</sup> Over ninety-percent of the respondents ranked «to determine B.C.G.E.U. policy» as either the first, second or third most important purpose of the convention (with fifty-nine percent ranking it as most important) (see Table 1). The directionality of the flow of information was also assessed as an indicator of democracy. More than twice as many delegates ranked the representation of local views in policy as being important compared to providing information to members back home (77 versus 33%, respectively). Finally, since the convention is the only body which can elect national officers,<sup>37</sup> the election of union officers should also be perceived as an important function of the convention. The third largest proportion of the sample (41%) ranked this factor as important. The pattern of results suggest that the preconditions established by Faunce for a democratic convention are met with the present sample of delegates.

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<sup>33</sup> The four locals represented a variety of occupational components in the Vancouver area. However, response rates were below forty-five percent for each local so that the representativeness of the respondents in comparison to total membership is not known.

<sup>34</sup> MICHELS, *op. cit.*

<sup>35</sup> The fact that leaders may be able to predict worker preferences and interests without having similar characteristics is shown by U. GLUSKINOS and B. KESTELMAN, «Management and Labor Leaders' Perception of Worker needs as Compared with Self-Reported Needs,» *Personnel Psychology*, XXIV (Summer, 1971), pp. 239-246.

<sup>36</sup> FAUNCE, «Delegate Attitudes,» *op. cit.*, p. 468.

<sup>37</sup> FAUNCE, «Delegate Attitudes,» *op. cit.*, p. 468.

**TABLE 1**  
**Perceived Purpose of the Convention**

<i>State Purpose</i>	<i>Ranked Importance</i>			
	<i>First %</i>	<i>Second %</i>	<i>Third %</i>	<i>Total %</i>
To inform members back home	6.3	7.9	19.0	33.3
To increase union solidarity	6.3	8.7	21.4	36.5
To show members approval of union policy	1.6	3.2	2.4	7.1
To determine B.C.G.E.U. policy	58.7	21.4	10.3	90.5
To have local views represented in policy	20.6	43.7	12.7	77.0
To elect union officers	0.8	10.3	30.2	41.3
Total N = 126	94.3	95.2	96.0	

*The Convention Decision-Making Process*: Decisions within the convention are made on the basis of majority votes of all delegates in convention.<sup>38</sup> For a resolution to be considered by the convention it must be received by Union headquarters at least sixty days prior to the convention date.<sup>39</sup> Only resolutions which have been submitted to and approved by a component or area council may be brought before the convention.<sup>40</sup> Thus, no individual member may submit a resolution to be dealt with directly by the convention. Furthermore, resolutions may not be presented by individual delegates from the convention floor. Once all resolutions, submitted within the prescribed time limits have been compiled, it is the responsibility of the union executive to add their own resolutions<sup>41</sup> and then to arrange for copies to be forwarded to components, locals, area councils and members prior to the convention.<sup>42</sup>

Each resolution is presented to the convention by the resolution committee in the form of a recommendation for concurrence or non-concurrence. A straight majority vote through a show of hands is sufficient to pass or defeat any resolution.<sup>43</sup> In addition, resolutions may

<sup>37</sup> *Constitution and Bylaws, op. cit.*, Article 8.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, Article 7, Section 5.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, Article 7, Section 4(c).

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, Article 7, Section 4(a).

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, Article 7, Section 4(b).

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, Article 7, Section 4 (d and c).

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, Article 7, Section 5.

be referred back to committee for reconsideration and subsequent re-submission to convention.

*Democracy in Convention Decision-Making:* The previous section outlined the constitutional procedure by which resolutions are submitted and decisions are made. However, democratic procedure may be necessary but not sufficient for democratic decision-making. One possible criteria to assess is the amount of opposition and debate over the resolutions presented to the delegates for decision. At the B.C.G.E.U. convention only thirty-six percent of the respondents actually spoke for or against the resolutions presented. However, sixty percent were able to state that definite factions existed over particular issues at the convention.

Table 2 presents an analysis of the discussion over the resolutions by issue and recommendation of the resolutions committee. First, it is important to note that not one recommendation of the resolutions committee was defeated. Therefore, in no instance was there enough opposition to significantly affect the voting results on any given resolution.<sup>44</sup> Only in 4.8 percent of the cases was there a significant debate with both pro and con statements regarding the issue. Moreover, in approximately 57 percent of the resolutions there was no discussion about the issue and no opposition in the voting. It appears that on the basis of the opposition and debate criterion, little democracy existed within the convention. However, with this analysis it is impossible to tell whether these results are due to democratic submission, review and presentation of resolutions or limitations on the decision-making process.

The amount of discussion seems to vary by issue and by committee recommendation. On those issues where there was some discussion and opposition (38.1%), more than half of them involved recommendations by the resolutions committee for non-concurrence on a component submitted resolution. Conversely, where concurrence was recommended and opposition ensued ( $n = 13$ ), 46 percent were resolutions submitted by the executive, 15.4 were substitute resolutions, and 7.8 percent (or one resolution) involved a dues increase. A further

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<sup>44</sup> George BROOKS suggested another possible explanation for the lack of opposition in convention decision-making. Consensus may be attained through the work of the executive and staff during the months prior to the convention. Major sources of opposition can be identified and persuaded to change their opinions, coopted by being appointed to staff or the resolutions committee, or bought off through various exchanges between the local and national union. More importantly frequent contact and discussion about the issues may be used to feel the pulse of the membership so that resolutions which may create major factions within the union will not be presented to convention.

**TABLE 2**

**Opposition Over Resolutions by Issue and Resolution Committee Recommendation**

<i>Resolution Committee Recom- mendation</i>	<i>Collective Bargaining</i>			<i>Vacation Leave</i>			<i>Constitu- tional</i>			<i>Health &amp; General Welfare</i>			<i>Finances</i>			<i>Organiza- tional</i>			<i>Super- annuation</i>			<i>Life Member- ship</i>			<i>Miscellaneous</i>		
	<i>n</i>	<i>s</i>	<i>d</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>s</i>	<i>d</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>s</i>	<i>d</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>s</i>	<i>d</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>s</i>	<i>d</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>s</i>	<i>d</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>s</i>	<i>d</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>s</i>	<i>d</i>			
Concurrence	6	1		1			3	3	3	3	2		1	1		2			4			4			2	1	
Non-concur- rence		2			2		1	6		1		2			4	1			4	2							
No decision referral to committee									3																		

Note: Issue categories are those used by the B.C.G.E.U. to group resolutions at convention.

Note: Although there were 75 resolutions to start, some were combined and resubmitted in the form of substitute resolutions and thus only 63 resolutions are reported in this table.

Note: N = none; s = some; d = debate.

analysis by issue area revealed that constitutional amendments accounted for 44.4% of the resolutions over which there was discussion with the remainder being equally distributed across issues. Moreover, the three resolutions over which significant debate occurred were constitutional amendments to increase the power of the executive over activities of subordinate union bodies and members. This finding is consistent with Rothbaum's contention that the greatest conflict in conventions occurs over distribution of powers between the national and local levels of union government.<sup>45</sup>

*Limitations on Democratic Decision-Making:* Given the relative lack of discussion over the seventy-five resolutions presented to the convention, it is important to determine the extent to which limitations existed on the delegates perceived freedom to vote in the manner desired as well as the impact of those limitations on democratic decision-making. Table 3 presents the means and standard deviation of the possible limitations assessed and correlations with three convention outcome variables; the delegate's perceived freedom in voting, the importance of the convention in decision making; the perceived satisfaction of the membership with decisions made at convention. It is proposed that the fewer the limitations of democratic decision making, the greater the perceived freedom in voting; the greater the perceived importance of the convention in policy making and the more satisfied the membership with convention decisions.

In order to vote intelligently delegates require enough information about the resolutions presented to convention. Fourteen days prior to the convention all delegates receive the list of resolutions and the officers reports.<sup>46</sup> Furthermore, most delegates have an opportunity to discuss the resolutions with their local membership or component or local executive. These discussions may take the form of instructions on how to vote on the various resolutions. However, if the delegates did not have an adequate opportunity to obtain information on the resolutions prior to convention little opportunity for obtaining the required information may have been available at the convention. Only eighteen of the resolutions were presented with any justification or reasoning for the committees recommendation. Moreover, where reasoning was given all resolutions involved a movement for non-concurrence. Thus, any individual who had not participated in component or local discussions may not have had the needed data on which

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<sup>45</sup> ROTHBAUM, *op. cit.*, p. 52.

<sup>46</sup> *Constitution and Bylaws, op. cit.*, Article 7, Section 5(c).

TABLE 3

## Limitations on Democratic Decision-Making in Union Conventions

<i>Limitations</i>	$\bar{X}$	$\sigma$	<i>Correlations with:</i>		
			<i>Freedom to Vote</i>	<i>Importance of Convention</i>	<i>Membership Satisfaction</i>
Having enough information	4.40	1.34	.14*	.29**	.15*
Prior instructions from local	56% (Y)		-.14	-.07	-.15*
Prior instructions from component	58% (Y)		-.21**	-.11	-.15*
Pressure to vote with component	3.23	1.80	-.19*	-.01	-.15*
Pressure to vote with resolutions committee	3.09	1.82	-.20**	.08	-.16*
Pressure to vote with majority	2.24	1.55	-.26**	.09	-.16*
Freedom to vote as desired	5.40	1.27	—	.28**	.37**

Note: \* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ : significance levels vary due to missing data.

Note: Y = Yes.

to base decisions. Furthermore, since sixty percent of the delegates were attending their first convention, it is unlikely that they would have been aware of the procedures of the convention or the available sources of information.

Respondents were asked how often they felt that they had enough information to vote on the resolutions. The mean on a six point scale ranging from never to always, 4.40 indicated that on average delegates felt that most of the time they had enough information to vote on the resolutions. In addition, approximately the same proportion of delegates had received instructions from their local (56%) and component (58%). The results also reveal that those delegates who had received instructions from their components felt more informed than did those who had not received instructions (4.41 versus 3.98).

The correlational analysis shows that the more often delegates feel that they have enough information to vote, the more often they feel free to vote as they please; the more important they view the convention in determining union policy; and the more the members are perceived to be satisfied with decisions made at convention. Thus, the lack of information on resolutions may act as an important limitation on convention decision making.

Delegates who had received prior instructions on how to vote from their component, perceived less freedom in voting and lower member satisfaction with convention decisions. Therefore, although component instructions may act to increase solidarity among delegates, it is also a potential limitation on the ability of delegates to adequately represent their constituents. Receiving local instructions also reduced perceived membership satisfaction with decision-making. No relationship was discovered with importance of the convention in policy making and either local or component instructions.

The next set of potential limitations on democratic decision making are the pressures on the delegate to vote in a certain way. As all voting at the convention was by show of hands, many informal pressures may be brought to bear on the dissenting delegate. Moreover, when the delegate is unsure of the way to vote on a particular resolution, it is easiest to vote with the majority. Respondents reported that very little of this type of pressure (to vote with majority) existed at the convention ( $\bar{X} = 2.24$  on a six point scale).

Given that recommendations of the resolutions committee were never rejected, and that little discussion occurred on the majority of resolutions, the pressure to support the resolutions committee may have been fairly strong. The respondents perceived that a moderate amount

of pressure to support resolution committee recommendations was used. Forty-five percent of the delegates responded either four, five, or six on a six point scale ranging from never to always, with a mean of 3.09. Thus, pressure to maintain the status quo may be relatively strong through this mechanism.<sup>47</sup>

Delegates representing locals from within a single occupational component were all seated together at the convention. Several delegates noted that overt tactics were used to stop individuals from speaking or voting the «wrong» way. The prevalence of pressure to vote with other component delegates was more often perceived than the corresponding pressure to vote with the majority or the resolutions committee at the convention. Fifty percent of the delegates reported that they felt pressure quite often (four or above on a six point scale; mean 3.23) to vote in the same way as other component delegates. Overall, the findings suggest that delegates perceived some form of pressure to vote in certain direction moderately often. The existence of such pressure is a definite limitation on the ability of the convention to result in democratically made decisions.

Examining the correlations with perceived freedom in voting, it is discovered that the more often a delegate felt each type of pressure, the less likely he was to believe that he had voted in the way he wanted to. The three pressure measures were also negatively (and significantly) associated with the contention that members were satisfied with the decisions made at convention. No relation was found to the importance of the convention in policy making. Perceiving pressure had the strongest correlations with limiting freedom in voting.

Overall, how often did delegates feel that they could vote the way that they wanted to on resolutions? It appears that at this convention individuals almost always felt free in voting ( $\bar{X} = 5.40$  on a six point scale). However, the correlations show that those delegates who did not perceive that freedom also viewed the convention as less important in setting union policy and did not believe that the membership were satisfied with the convention decisions. In fact, these associations were among the strongest limitations on convention democracy. Thus, freedom in voting (and not having enough information) acted as significant factors in the potential for decisions to be made democratically within a union convention.

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<sup>47</sup> The resolutions committee is appointed by the union executive from within the executive and staff of the union. Thus decisions of this group are likely to reflect the interests of the administration.

One final variable which was observed but not measured was the impact of union staff on convention decision-making. The most overt exhibit of pressure to support the resolutions committee was during a debate over increased centralized control over collective bargaining. Just at the point where the vote was to be taken the General Secretary<sup>48</sup> entered the convention hall to a standing ovation. He addressed the convention for approximately fifteen minutes with respect to the resolution at hand. Arguments were presented relating to the need for a united front in bargaining, the perils of fragmentation, and the required unity in the case of a change in government administration. The subsequent vote, although highly contested previously was almost unanimous as a result of his speech.

One delegate reported that the General Secretary had been watching the debate on closed circuit video tape and that his entrance had been carefully timed. Although the General Secretary later denied this in an interview and stated that he had waited until all the debates were completed before entering so as not to directly influence the proceedings, he was definitely aware of his impact on the members and staff of the union. Staff involvement, then may be an important factor in the democratic nature of convention decision making.

#### DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Researchers interested in national union democracy should remember that the convention is only one aspect of national democracy (others include powers of the executive over subordinate bodies and members and national election) and that having frequent conventions<sup>49</sup> (or studying the frequency of conventions) in itself is not a guarantee of democratic union government. Many activities prior to and surrounding the convention are important to the existence of democracy. The selection of delegates, the appointment or selection of the resolutions and other convention committees, the resolution submission process, as well as the delegates access to convention committees and those committees power over what is presented to convention are all areas for

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<sup>48</sup> In February 1975, the General Secretary had been involved in a near fatal car accident while on union business. His entry at the convention was his first public appearance since that accident and was against doctors orders. He entered on crutches with visible difficulty all of which contributed to the delegates' response.

<sup>49</sup> The B.C.G.E.U. constitution specifies a definite time limit including a minimum and maximum range; *Constitution and Bylaws, op. cit.*, Article 6, Section 2.

concern. Within the convention itself, the amount of discussion and limitations on that discussion deserve attention in assessing the extent of democratic decision-making or in building a theory of the true role of the convention in national union government. The present study examined a series of these factors and suggests some implications for theory and policy relevant to national union conventions.

Several factors which may detract from democratic decision-making are suggested by the present analysis. First of all, following Michels' concern,<sup>50</sup> it is possible that delegates may not be truly representative of their constituent bodies. The inability to represent may be due to the structure of local entitlements as determined by the union executive; the procedures and local involvement in elections to choose delegates; and the differences in characteristics and attitudes of the delegates in comparison to those of the local membership. These factors are important in that all tend to ensure support for administration proposals and fail to ensure that all potential interest groups are represented at convention. These considerations in themselves may limit the amount of discussion about convention resolutions.

Furthermore, it has been pointed out that if the convention is not viewed as important in the establishment of union policy it may not be able to perform its functions. This may be a necessary but not sufficient condition to guarantee democratic decision-making. The findings reported here suggest that although the convention was perceived as very important in policy making, little discussion occurred and other variables existed which tended to limit the importance of the convention and membership satisfaction with convention decisions.

In an absolute sense, very little debate ensued over resolutions presented to delegates for decisions at the convention. Several important insights into the factors which may limit the vitality of the convention are identified. Restrictions on who, when, and where resolutions may be submitted as well as the role of the union executive in screening and compiling the resolutions may affect the resulting discussion. The composition, power, recommendations, and access to the resolutions committee may also detract from the democratic nature of the convention. Thus, even prior to the convention itself many forces may have been operating which will place outer limits on the potential for decisions made to be representative of the interests of the membership.

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<sup>50</sup> MICHELS, *op. cit.*

Within the convention itself, several influences may limit the amount of debate, making the convention less important in policy making in the eyes of both the membership and the delegates. Not having enough information on the resolutions, receiving prior instructions on how to vote, feeling pressure from various sectors, and not feeling free to vote independently on resolutions were all found to be important deterrents to democratic decision-making within the convention. Union staff were also seen to have a strong impact of how resolutions were decided.

All of the results have important implications for both policy-makers, academics and practitioners alike who have an interest in democratic union government. The fact that legislation may establish outside time limits on the period between conventions does little to guarantee that decisions made or elections held at convention will meet the desired standards of representativeness. Moreover, given the importance of the convention to national union government more research is needed into the determinants of convention democracy. This study has only tentatively specified some of the variables which might have an impact on decision making. More extensive analysis is required into the role of the resolutions committee, union staff, and delegate interest groups in union conventions.

### **Les obstacles à la démocratie dans les congrès syndicaux**

Dans cette étude, l'auteur se demande dans quelle mesure les décisions prises dans les congrès syndicaux peuvent être démocratiques. Il s'agit d'un cas type: le 31<sup>e</sup> congrès du Syndicat des employés du gouvernement de la Colombie Britannique tenu au mois de juin 1975.

Dans la première partie de son exposé, l'auteur passe en revue les recherches scientifiques qui ont été effectuées sur le sujet. Selon ces recherches, plus les congrès se tiennent à intervalles rapprochés, plus la probabilité est grande que les décisions atteintes le soit de façon démocratique. On fait aussi entrer en ligne de compte la durée et le nombre de délégués au congrès. Ainsi, plus le nombre de délégués est élevé, moins ceux-ci ont de possibilités de s'exprimer, plus il leur est difficile de mettre en branle une opposition efficace et organisée, plus facile aussi est le contrôle des mécanismes de procédures du congrès. Les différents auteurs qui se sont intéressés à cette question ont indiqué que ce qui caractérise davantage la valeur démocratique d'un syndicat au cours d'un congrès, c'est la possibilité d'en établir les politiques et la facilité avec laquelle les délégués peuvent faire connaître l'opinion des membres qu'ils représentent.

En ce qui concerne les délégués, on sait généralement assez peu de choses au sujet de leurs antécédents; fonctions syndicales, expérience de congrès antérieurs, caractéristiques démographiques, etc. En règle générale, les délégués appartenant à des sections locales importantes jouent un rôle plus grand dans le déroulement d'un congrès que les délégués provenant de sections locales moins fortes.

Un autre aspect qui peut indiquer le caractère démocratique d'un congrès, c'est la façon dont on dispose des résolutions qui peuvent être soumises par les sections locales ou la haute direction du syndicat, résolutions qui souvent sont peu discutées et qui ont été préalablement passées au crible par un comité spécial.

Ce rappel fait, l'auteur décrit comment il a procédé à son enquête. Des questionnaires ont été adressés à tous les délégués inscrits au congrès et 126 d'entre eux sur un total de 216 ont retourné le questionnaire dûment rempli. Les faits relatifs au choix des délégués, à la formation des comités, au but du congrès, au mode d'examen des résolutions ont été tirés des statuts et règlements du syndicat. Pour apprécier la vigueur des débats et l'importance de l'opposition relativement aux résolutions, l'auteur s'en est remis au procès-verbal du congrès en classant les résolutions suivant qu'elles n'ont donné lieu à aucune, à peu ou à une grande opposition.

Quant au questionnaire, il demandait si les délégués s'étaient sentis libres de voter selon leur choix, s'ils ressentaient l'importance du congrès dans l'élaboration de la politique du syndicat, si les membres des sections locales étaient satisfaits des décisions prises au congrès. Le questionnaire demandait aussi certains renseignements touchant le délégué et la section locale à laquelle il appartenait.

L'auteur fait ensuite part des résultats de son enquête. Inutile d'insister sur la désignation des délégués, si ce n'est que, dans plusieurs sections locales, ceux-ci sont choisis uniquement parmi les membres du bureau de direction. Quant aux caractéristiques démographiques des délégués, qu'il suffise de rappeler qu'ils sont âgés de quarante ans en moyenne, que 87% d'entre eux sont des hommes, qu'ils sont membres du syndicat depuis sept ans et demi, que 63% d'entre eux ont déjà fait partie d'un autre syndicat, que 87% occupent un poste dans leur section locale, que 60% en étaient à leur premier congrès. Les résultats indiquent que les délégués, en très grande majorité des hommes, sont plus âgés que la masse des syndiqués, font partie de l'association depuis plus longtemps qu'eux et qu'ils sont la plupart du temps des dirigeants d'une section locale.

Pour les délégués, l'objectif majeur d'un congrès doit résider dans l'élaboration des politiques du Syndicat. Les délégués estiment aussi le congrès comme la Tribune où les délégués peuvent exprimer l'opinion de leurs mandants. On perçoit aussi l'élection du bureau de direction comme une des tâches importantes des délégués.

L'auteur explique ensuite la procédure qu'on suit dans la présentation des résolutions au congrès. Il note que seulement 36% des délégués sont intervenus dans les débats portant sur les résolutions et qu'aucune des recommandations présentées par le comité des résolutions n'a été battue. Il n'y eut véritable débat que dans environ 5% des cas. De plus, 57% des résolutions ont été adoptées sans débat ni opposition. La discussion varie selon la nature des questions débattues. Sur les sujets où il y eut certains débats et quelque opposition, il y en avait plus de la moitié dont le rejet était recommandé par le comité des résolutions. Par contre, là où l'adoption était recommandée et qu'il y eut opposition, presque la moitié de ces résolutions avaient été soumises par le bureau de direction, 15% étaient des résolutions modifiées et 7.8% (une seule résolution) portait sur l'augmentation des cotisations. D'autre part, une analyse plus approfondie indiquait que près de la moitié des résolutions débattues avaient trait à des modifications aux statuts et trois d'entre elles visaient à accroître les pouvoirs de l'organisation centrale.

Au sujet des résolutions, il était demandé aux délégués s'ils étaient assez bien informés pour voter de façon intelligente. Sur ce point, les réponses données furent positives et les délégués, qui avaient reçus des directives de leurs mandats, étaient les mieux informés. Plus les délégués se disent bien informés, plus ils se sentent libres de

voter comme ils leur plaît et plus ils considèrent le rôle du congrès dans l'élaboration de la politique du Syndicat. Cependant, les délégués qui avaient reçus des directives de leurs mandats se sentaient moins libres de voter à leur gré et ils paraissaient moins satisfaits d'avoir apporté au congrès une participation véritable.

Une limitation sérieuse au principe de décisions prises démocratiquement réside dans les pressions qui peuvent s'exercer sur les délégués au moment du vote parce que ceux-ci se prennent à main levée. Ainsi, le délégué hésitant est enclin à se ranger du côté de la majorité. Les répondants se disent peu influencés par ce genre de pressions. On reconnaissait, toutefois, que les recommandations du comité des résolutions pouvaient influencer leur vote, constatation qui est confirmé par le fait qu'aucune des recommandations du comité ne fut rejeté.

Par ailleurs, les délégués, qui étaient les mandataires d'un groupe professionnel donné, étaient placés ensemble au congrès. Plusieurs délégués ont noté à ce sujet que des tactiques manifestes avaient été utilisées pour empêcher des individus de parler ou de voter de « la mauvaise manière ». La moitié des délégués ont reconnu avoir subi ce genre de pressions, ce qui est une entrave à la prise de décisions démocratiques.

On a aussi retenu un dernier point: l'influence des permanents du syndicat pendant le congrès. L'auteur cite l'exemple de l'intervention du secrétaire général du Syndicat pour appuyer une recommandation du bureau de direction visant à la centralisation des négociations collectives.

En conclusion, l'auteur remarque que le congrès n'est qu'un des aspects de l'action démocratique à l'intérieur des syndicats et que la tenue de congrès fréquents n'est pas la garantie d'une action vraiment démocratique. Plusieurs activités antérieures à la tenue même des congrès, comme le choix des délégués, le choix des membres du comité des résolutions, l'accès des délégués aux divers comités du congrès et les pouvoirs de ces comités sont autant de domaines qui peuvent influencer sur les caractéristiques de la démocratie syndicale. Au cours du congrès lui-même, l'importance des débats doit retenir l'attention. Il ressort de ce qui précède que plusieurs facteurs peuvent nuire à la prise de décisions vraiment démocratiques. Il est possible que les délégués ne représentent pas vraiment les sections locales. On peut retenir encore que, si l'on ne considère pas le congrès comme un moyen d'établir les politiques du syndicat, celui-ci n'est pas en mesure de remplir ses fonctions, qu'il n'y a que peu de débats approfondis touchant les résolutions, que l'influence du comité des résolutions est de nature à fausser le caractère démocratique du congrès que, même avant la tenue du congrès, des forces peuvent s'exercer qui limitent la liberté d'action des délégués, que, pendant le congrès, nombre d'influences sont de nature à entraver également leur liberté et que, enfin, les permanents syndicaux peuvent de leur côté jouer un rôle décisif sur les décisions qui sont prises.