

What democracy looks like



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I believe that “unionism” itself should be symbolic of fairness. It’s a collective of various groups coming together to advocate for the rights of the individual or those who cannot fight for themselves. If you have ever been to a labor rally (and coming from Chicago, the birthplace of the labor movement, I have been to quite a few), at some point a chant will go out about “what democracy looks like.” As the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. once eloquently stated: “The greatness of America is the right to protest for *right*.” He was referring to the ability to exercise our constitutional rights

to peacefully assemble and our freedom of speech. Absent that, it looks and feels like the antithesis of democracy: autocracy! That, my brothers and sisters, I submit to you is the greatness of our union. Ours is a **very** democratic union (emphasis added!).

One would think that within labor unions that democracy is a given, but the sad truth is, it is not! If you have ever belonged to another union (*and I have*), you probably fully understand the point that I am making. If you have ever had the opportunity to go to other labor conventions (*and I have*), even the AFL-CIO at any level, including their local labor councils or meetings, it’s not the same as the NALC. Theirs are generally very “scripted,” or they have rules in place that do not allow for the fair expression of dissenting opinions or open debate. Those who have served as AFL-CIO delegates for the NALC will tell you that it’s not what you may think that it is. This is why I prioritize *understanding* our *Constitution* when teaching on the *NALC Constitution* and bylaws during the various trainings I have conducted.

Changing your bylaws is not only about correctly following the procedures before the submission but also understanding the magnitude of the changes that are being proposed. There is a reason why the enactment of constitutional amendments in the NALC is few and far between at our conventions. It’s not because our members don’t like change, but rather many have gathered for more than a few conventions and have a better understanding of *why* some provisions are in

the *Constitution* in the first place. This doesn’t mean that new ideas or concepts aren’t warranted or wanted, just that we should fully understand the historical significance and implications before changing an established practice that has served our union well.

I love to see all the new and younger faces at our conventions and gatherings, just as much as I enjoy engaging with those who have been around for a few minutes. Those who have “been around” tend to know *stuff* that the newer attendees may not even consider when coming up with some of their “great ideas.” But, likewise, we can’t shut the door to new ideas because change happens! Like the changing of the seasons, it will happen whether you like it or not. It’s the *resistance* to change that makes it difficult.

If our union is, in fact, going through a paradigm shift, which is usually a generational thing, each side of the equation needs the other. While I was sitting on stage through all of the debate, I thought to myself, “this *is* what democracy looks like!” Whether we agreed with the outcome of any vote, there was the open sharing of positions, and a fair amount of time and opportunity given to everyone. I thought that President Renfro did an excellent job of handling such an arduous task when there was so much to consider with all the amendments and resolutions proposed this year. Again, in other unions, they would not have made it to the convention floor.

While I agree that the rules at our convention could use some tweaking, it must be the will of the “supreme body.” Should it be mandatory that we hear one or two arguments: pros and cons before a vote? Or do we continue to allow the members gathered to indicate whether they are ready to weigh in on the question? That, too, is democracy—which means that the vote won’t always go the way that you want or think that it should. When that happens, we must be willing to accept it and not abuse the very “democracy” that gives us a voice. Playing parliamentary games that serve no useful purpose only undermines our democracy, and it will not win people to the other side of the argument. And that could become a detriment to our union if we are not flexible enough to listen to another point of view. Our convention may not have been pretty at times, but we can truly say, *that is what democracy looks like!*