NEOLIBERAL RESTRUCTURING AND U.S. UNIONS: TOWARD SOCIAL MOVEMENT UNIONISM?

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Abstract

This paper identifies three causal pathways by which economic restructuring attributable to neoliberal policies has promoted a shift away from the previously dominant culture of business unionism, and toward social movement unionism, in the U.S. labor movement. These union types are located within a larger typology of voluntary, autonomous unions organized around two dimensions of union leadership culture: who union leaders think the labor movement should organize and/or represent and defend (inclusiveness); and how critical union leaders are of the economic and/or political status quo, and what kinds of alternatives (if any) they think the labor movement should fight to put in its place (criticalness). In the United States, neoliberal restructuring has shifted eight of ten variables that have important effects on union leadership culture toward the optimal conditions for social movement unionism. The links from neoliberal restructuring to changes in these conditions to shifts in the leadership cultures of some unions, and in the relative power of those unions, are traced over the period from 1979 to the present.

Introduction

In the last decade, the concept of “social movement unionism” has become popular among students of labor movements in countries such as South Africa, Brazil, South Korea, and the Philippines (Webster 1988, Scipes 1992, Seaidman 1994, Adler 1997). More recently, analysts and activists have begun applying the concept to organized labor in the United States, as a characterization of some unions within the larger movement (Dreiling & Robinson 1998, Johnston 1994), as an ideal towards which organized labor ought to be moving if it wishes to recapture lost economic and political power (Goldfield 1987, Moody 1997), or both (Hurd & Turner 2000, Robinson 2000). In shifting the focus from the global South to the global North, the concept of social movement unionism has become broader and vaguer. Still, the concept can be useful, both for explanation and prescription, provided its meaning is clear. The first task of this paper is to offer a more precise definition of social movement unionism (SMU).

Beyond the problem of definition, this paper addresses three empirical questions. Has there been a shift toward social movement unionism? If so, has neoliberal economic restructuring contributed to that
shift? If so, by what causal paths has it made this contribution? I argue that neoliberal economic restructuring is indeed pushing the U.S. labor movement toward social movement unionism as defined here.²

The paper is divided into three parts. Part A argues for a union typology that allows us to compare social movement and business unionism on two dimensions of union leadership culture: inclusiveness and radicalness. Part B sketches three causal routes by which neoliberal restructuring (NLR) is pushing the dominant form of unionism in the U.S. from business unionism towards SMU. Finally, Part C identifies important changes along each of the three causal pathways that are caused (or intensified) by NLR and push union leaders toward greater inclusiveness and/or radicalness. It then identifies AFL-CIO policies since 1994 that reflect shifts in these directions.

Defining Social Movement Unionism

We can distinguish different types of unions by where they are located on four dimensions. Each dimension is best understood as a continuum. There are strong interaction effects among these dimensions, but none is completely determined by one of the others. Each dimension can be understood as a relationships between unions and other actors. Each relationship bears on the goals that unions pursue, and the strategies by which they pursue these goals:

Voluntary/Involuntary: relationship of unions to their members.
Autonomous/Subordinate: relationship of unions to their chief interlocutors in the political and economic power structure: the state, political parties, and employers.
Inclusive/Exclusive: relationship of unions to workers (national and international), particularly those who are not union members.
Critical/Uncritical: relationship of unions to existing political and economic organizing principles, institutions, and elites (national and international).

In voluntary unions, most if not all members join and remain in the union due to personal commitments or positive selective incentives. By contrast, most members of involuntary unions would not remain in them were it not for compulsion or coercion by unions, employers, and/or the state. State socialist and state corporatist regimes often created unions that all workers were required to join, while outlawing rivals. In such countries, involuntary unions are the dominant type, unless illegal rivals
successfully challenge the state-sanctioned unions, as occurred in Brazil in the 1970s and Poland in the 1980s.³

Autonomous unions pursue goals determined by their members and leaders, rather than goals determined by the state, employers, political parties or some other exogenous actor (e.g., organized crime). In autonomous unions, there will be a distinct union leadership culture that specifies and justifies basic union goals. Subordinate unions derive their goals from the exogenous actors to which they are subordinated. State socialist, authoritarian corporatist, and company unions begin life as clear cases of subordinate unionism, though they may evolve away from those origins over time. Because involuntary unions typically rely on external actors for their main power resources, they generally have low levels of autonomy. Their principal purpose is the control of their members in the interests of the external actor supplying the power resources.

Voluntary unions vary greatly in their level of autonomy, particularly from states and parties. Most voluntary unions—particularly those that seek to maintain a high level of autonomy—try to maintain strong member commitments to the union by convincing members that it is an important means by which they can defend the interests of groups with which they identify, and/or fight for what they think is right and just (Kelly 1998). The leadership cultures of voluntary unions are shaped by these efforts, and constrained by the nature of worker collective identities and political economies.⁴ Every union leadership culture is different, but for some purposes it is useful to abstract from these particularities to identify two dimensions of union leadership culture in voluntary, autonomous unions, and four types of unionism based upon them.⁵

A union’s location on the “inclusiveness” dimension is determined by the breadth of the groups that the union seeks to organize as members, or to represent as people whose interests the union will articulate and defend. No single union aspires to organize or represent every worker in the nation, but some labor movements try to do so.⁶ The ambitions of highly inclusive unions often extend to workers in other countries, and/or beyond workers to members of other classes who share some feature of common identity such as race, religion or nationality.⁷ Conversely, exclusive unions may define those who they will not attempt to organize or represent in terms of skills, race, religion, nationality, or some combination of these. A union’s location on the second dimension, criticalness, is determined by how critical union leaders are of the basic institutions and rules of the national and international political economy, and of the economic and political elites responsible for them.⁸
Figure 1. Four Types of Voluntary Unions

KEY:
- AFL 1: AFL, 1920–35
- AFL 2: AFL, c. 1945
- CIO: CIO, c. 1945
- AFL-CIO 1: AFL-CIO, 1955–95
- AFL-CIO 2: AFL-CIO, 1995+
- CLC 1: Canadian Labour Congress, c. 1945
- CLC 2: CLC, 1955+
- KoL: Knights of Labor, c. 1885
- IWW: Industrial Workers of the World, c. 1917
- UAW 1: United Automobile Workers, c. 1940
- UAW 2: UAW, c. 1985
- CAW: Canadian Auto Workers
- COSATU: Congress of South African Trade Unions, 1985–95
- CGT: Communist-led federation, France, 1960–75
Criticalness reflects judgements about how the existing political economic order works, how just this order is, and what feasible alternatives exist.\textsuperscript{9}

Inclusiveness and criticalness can be treated as X and Y axes, creating four quadrants within a two-dimensional space. It is possible to locate the dominant tendency in national labor movements comprised primarily of voluntary, autonomous unions within these quadrants, as in Figure One. As the figure makes clear, there are many degrees but to simplify our presentation, we focus on the ideal typical cases that occupy the four corners of the figure, with all the usual caveats about the relationship between ideal types and real world phenomena.

The ideal typical business union is very exclusive and largely uncritical. Its leaders—and, often, many of its members as well—understand it as a business that provides highly specialized services (e.g., collective bargaining and grievance processing) to members (customers) in return for dues (fees). Members alone count for such a union. Non-members, even those belonging to other unions in the same labor federation, are someone else’s business, unless their work falls within the union’s existing or desired jurisdiction, in which case it might seek to organize them into the union. Members have a very limited role in business unions. Leaders who practice this type of unionism are no more committed to internal democracy than is a typical business, whatever the constitutional formalities. Business unionists tend to accept the legitimacy of the business metaphors and values that they bring to their organization, including the assumption that they own the organization. Their criticisms of competitive capitalism tend to be narrow and \textit{ad hoc}, focused on unfairly low wages or “bad” employers, rather than the limits of, say, market economies \textit{qua} systems of economic organization. They take an equally uncritical stance on the political system, making no effort to create new political parties, or to challenge the regime in more basic ways.

The ideal typical social movement union (SMU) is highly inclusive and highly critical of \textit{status quo} economic and/or political arrangements. SMU leaders understand their union as part of a larger social movement that aims to bring the economic and political order into line with the ideals and possibilities identified by their notion of a just political economy. These ambitious social change goals arise in part from a concern for many who are not, and will never be, members of the union. The gap between union/movement ideals and current realities is typically perceived to be large and growing. As a consequence, SMUs will not rely exclusively on conventional processes—electoral politics and collective bargaining—to advance their goals. In extreme cases, they may
eschew these strategies entirely. Refusal to rely exclusively on conventional political channels often provokes hostility on the part of economic and political elites. As a result, SMUs can expect little support from these elites, and must rely heavily on their capacity to generate strong member commitments to the union and its social change goals. To achieve and maintain high levels of membership commitment, SMUs must encourage members’ sense that they “own” their unions—that is, that they decide their priorities and strategies and are responsible for realizing those goals collectively. This pushes SMU unions to encourage high levels of member participation in all aspects of union life, and to decentralize decision-making where possible to facilitate such participation (Hyman 1994).

The ideal typical social union has elements of each of the two types just described. It can be as inclusive as a social movement union, but it is not critical of existing economic and political institutions. Through some intra-movement division of labor, social unions seek to organize most if not all workers, and support public policies aimed at benefiting workers, whether or not they are union members. However, their uncritical stance on the political economic status quo implies support for one of the existing political parties, which sometimes means for the government as well. They put most if not all of their political efforts into electoral work on behalf of this party ally. The kinds of extra-parliamentary political action upon which SMUs (and social movements in general) rely heavily, because they view electoral politics as stacked against them and/or deeply corrupting, is much less important for social unions. Because they act mainly or entirely within conventional institutions, and are regarded as powerful, legitimate actors, they usually rely less on member mobilization capacity than on the protections and incentives afforded by those institutions.

The ideal typical sectarian union shares the critical orientation of SMUs. Like social and social movements unions, sectarian unions often speak on behalf of the interests of the working class or the people of the nation as a whole. But a labor movement comprised mainly of sectarian unions never seriously attempts to organize all workers as union members. Rather, it organizes only those who accept the ideology that defines their basic goals. Thus, at the membership level, sectarian unions are much less inclusive than social and social movement unions. The leading examples of sectarian unions are a subset of Communist and Catholic unions. As these examples suggest, such unions are often closely tied to political parties with very specific ideologies. The more
exclusive character of sectarian unions allows them to be more critical than social movement unions, and more doctrinaire in how they frame their critique. The inclusiveness of SMUs means that they must frame their critique of the existing order in moral terms that make sense to a broad diverse membership, as well as to non-union workers whose support or membership they seek. For this reason, there is a potential trade-off between degrees and forms of criticalness on the one hand, and degrees of inclusiveness on the other. Sectarian unions respond to this trade-off by embracing a systematic, doctrinaire critique and abandoning inclusiveness.

How NLR Affects Conditions Favoring Social Movement Unionism

Given this definition of SMU, is neoliberal restructuring (NLR) contributing to the strength of social movement unionism in the United States? NLR amounts to a change in the environment in which unions operate, so we need to know how environmental conditions affect the type of unionism that becomes dominant in a particular society at a particular moment. We then need to know what kinds of environmental conditions are most conducive to SMU. Finally, we need to know whether NLR tends to alter these conditions in ways that make them more or less conducive to social movement unionism. I offer a more developed discussion of these issues elsewhere. Here there is only space to summarize its conclusions without much elaboration or defense.

Three Paths from Environment to Union Type

Figure Two shows that there are two distinct causal pathways by which the economic and political environment can affect union leadership culture. The first runs directly from environment to union culture, as indicated by the (1) beside the causal arrow. Under this heading fall economic outcomes, social structures, or political institutions that tend to promote critical perceptions of the political economic order, while minimizing differences in worker collective identities that might be obstacles to an inclusive form of unionism. Such conditions are expected to affect the beliefs of many if not most workers, including union members. For example, if the real wages of unskilled workers fall year after year, we expect those workers to become more critical of the economic system that generates these results.

The second route runs from the environment to the declining effectiveness of traditional union strategies for realizing their goals and from
Figure 2. Three Routes from Environmental Conditions to Union Culture and Type

- **Union Culture***
  - Union Leaders
  - Non-Activist Union Members
  - Non-Union Working Class
  - Other Factors

- **Environmental Conditions**
  - (including Economic & Political Opportunity Structures)

- **Union Strategy**

- **Union Behavior**

- **Structural Relations**
  - (Degree of Union Autonomy & Share of Voluntary Membership)

*Note: Spheres Not to Scale*
there to strategic innovations that have substantial impacts on union culture over the longer run. This route, indicated by (2) beside the relevant causal arrows, involves changes in union behavior in response to shifts in the economic or political opportunity structures that unions face. For example, changes in employer behavior may stimulate new organizing strategies that increase the diversity of union membership. A more inclusive union collective identity may result as more women and people of color become union members and move up to union leadership positions.

There is a third way in which changes in the environment can affect the prevalence of SMU within a national labor movement. This route, indicated by (3), works through its effect on the viability of social movement unionism, relative to rival union types. For example, if business unionism’s characteristic strategies cannot secure the kinds of economic and political gains that workers have been encouraged to expect from such unions, they may be much less effective in their competition with rival unions espousing more inclusive and/or critical visions of labor movement goals and strategies. In the United States, the greatest increase in the relative strength of industrial unions espousing a more inclusive and critical standpoint occurred when the Great Depression rendered the craft unions of the AFL weaker and less effective opponents than at any time since the 1890s.

The first two routes are about how the environment affects the kind of unionism that best reflects the beliefs of union leaders, union members, and non-union workers concerning who and what unions should be fighting for and against. By contrast, the third route is about how the environment shapes the kind of unionism that is most successful in organizing workers and realizing at least some of their economic and political goals. What most workers desire and what “works best,” given a particular set of economic and political opportunity structures, may not be the same sort of unionism.

Optimal Conditions for SMU and Impact of NLR on Those Conditions

What kinds of environmental conditions, operating along the three causal pathways, are most conducive to a labor movement in which social movement unionism predominates? The left-hand column of Table One lists ten conditions expected to have powerful impacts in most if not all cases. Conditions A1 through A5 encourage SMU via the first causal path, conditions B6 and B7 promote SMU via the second path, and conditions C8 through C10 do the same via the third route. The
<table>
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<th>Optimal Conditions for SMU</th>
<th>NLR Impact on Conditions Favoring SMU, ceteris paribus</th>
<th>Direction of NLR Impact</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A1. Collective identities cross-cutting class among working people are weak.</td>
<td>Promotes more labor migration w/ in USA and from Latin America, increasing Latino share of low-skilled workers.</td>
<td>P</td>
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<tr>
<td>A2. Substantial, sustained negative economic changes for most workers.</td>
<td>Exacerbates class inequalities of income and wealth, and reduces living standards of most unskilled workers.</td>
<td>PP</td>
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<tr>
<td>A3. Moderate state repression of all types of autonomous unions.</td>
<td>Reduces union economic power and justifies reductions in legal or <em>de facto</em> worker rights.</td>
<td>P</td>
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<td>A4. High level of state economic intervention.</td>
<td>Reduces visibility of state’s economic role.</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A5. Absence of democracy or low quality democracy.</td>
<td>Narrows scope and quality of democracy.</td>
<td>P</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B6. Substantial decline in union membership, and traditional organizing methods ineffective for previously dominant union type.</td>
<td>Heavy loss of membership in manufacturing sector + increasing employer hostility to unions provoked by intensified intnl competition =&gt; dramatic decline in organizing victories and union density levels.</td>
<td>PP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B7. Substantial decline in union capacity to secure gains through collective bargaining.</td>
<td>Substantial decline in union collective bargaining power in most all sectors, especially in trade-exposed manufacturing.</td>
<td>PP</td>
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<tr>
<td>C8. Political agenda minimizes intra-working class cleavages.</td>
<td>Impact on political agenda limited, but effect is to raise profile of economic inequality and social justice issues.</td>
<td>P</td>
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<tr>
<td>C9. State and corporate elites can not agree to repress SMUs.</td>
<td>Little if any impact on this condition.</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C10. Economic and political power of traditionally dominant union type in sharp decline.</td>
<td>Highly detrimental to the traditional economic and political strategies of business unionism.</td>
<td>PP</td>
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center column of Table One summarizes the most important impacts that neoliberal restructuring has on each of the ten conditions. The right-hand column of the table reflects my assessment of whether—and by how much—the changes induced by NLR push the condition in question closer to the optimal situation for SMU or further away from it. Changes that are conducive to SMU are indicated by “P” (Positive impact) or “PP” (very Positive impact); changes that push in the opposite direction are indicated by “N” (Negative impact) or “NN” (very Negative impact); “0” designates little or no effect.

I cannot run through the impacts reported in Column B for all ten conditions in Table One. However, three examples, focusing on some of the less obvious conditions, may be helpful. As regards Condition A1, neoliberal restructuring has promoted increased labor migration from Central America to Mexico and the United States, and from rural Mexico to urban and northern Mexico and the United States. In the past, great waves of immigration from diverse sources divided the U.S. working class in myriad ways, making the construction of highly inclusive forms of unionism more difficult, (though not impossible). However, a larger share of recent immigration stimulated by NLR comes from one linguistic group (Latinos), and reinforces an already substantial Latino population. The rapid growth of the Latino population makes it more difficult for unions to ignore or marginalize this group, and it makes immigration less problematic for inclusive unionism. Indeed, because of the cultural traditions and personal experiences that many Latino immigrants bring with them, the growth of this particular group may make a significant contribution to the development of more critical and inclusive unionism in the United States. The impact of this trend is therefore expected to be positive, and the magnitude of the effect moderate.

On Condition A5, neoliberal policies narrow the scope of U.S. democracy by transferring policy-making power, *de facto* and *de jure*, from elected governments to unelected national (i.e., central banks) and supra-national (e.g., IMF, WTO, and transnational corporations) organizations. Neoliberal policies also reduce the quality of democracy by exacerbating income and wealth inequalities, resulting in increased inequalities in political power (Robinson 1993, 1995). This effect is particularly powerful in the United States, where income and wealth inequality translate into larger inequalities in political power than in polities where private political advertising and campaign contributions are more restricted. By significantly reducing the scope and quality of U.S. democracy, neoliberal policies shift the environment in which unions operate toward the
<table>
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<th>Measures of Union Power Resources &amp; Economic Power (year of data)</th>
<th>Canada</th>
<th>United States</th>
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<tr>
<td>2. Member Volunteerism (% of members) (1989)</td>
<td>26.5</td>
<td>18.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Union Societal Mobilization Capacity [union density (%) × member volunteerism (%)] (1989)</td>
<td>9.1</td>
<td>3.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Relative Strike Involvement (Striking Workers per 1,000 in Workforce)</td>
<td>1960–69</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1968–73</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1974–79</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1980–88</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Real Compensation-Labor Productivity Growth Rate Gap, Manufacturing Sector (Mean Annual % Change)</td>
<td>1961–71</td>
<td>−0.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1971–81</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1981–88</td>
<td>−1.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1991–97</td>
<td>−2.1</td>
</tr>
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Sources:
type of exclusionary polity in which SMUs tend to thrive, other things being equal. How far in this direction NLR shifts the U.S. polity is open to debate. I think the change will probably result in a moderate improvement in conditions for SMU.

Finally, consider Condition C10. NLR has reduced the economic bargaining power of all types of unions throughout the world by increasing international capital mobility and, often, unemployment as well. Declining economic bargaining power is a blow to any union, but it is particularly costly for business unions because their culture encourages members to judge them mainly on their ability to deliver economic benefits. Moreover, because they typically have less mobilization capacity than the other three types of autonomous, voluntary unionism, business unions are liable to suffer greater losses in economic bargaining power, given the same adverse change in the economic opportunity structure. We can see the difference by comparing data from the United States and Canada. Business unionism was the dominant tendency in the U.S. when the labor movement encountered NLR, while social unionism was (and remains) the dominant type in Canada. Table Two summarizes data for the two countries on (1) union density, (2) union member volunteerism levels, (3) societal mobilization capacity, (4) the “relative involvement” of workers in strikes, and (5) trends in real compensation/productivity gap in the manufacturing sector.

Row 3 of the table indicates that the Canadian labor movement had roughly three times the societal mobilization capacity of its U.S. counterpart in 1989 (i.e., after a decade of NLR). Row 4 shows us that, as a share of the total workforce, almost eight times as many Canadians were involved in strikes as their U.S. counterparts in 1989. The higher level of mobilization in Canada did not prevent the decline of real compensation, relative to productivity, in the 1980s and 1990s. However, the gap between the two grew 85 percent faster in the United States in the 1980s, and 48 percent faster in the 1990s. Of course, Canada-U.S. differences other than the dominant type of unionism also affect the differences in Table Two. Space does not permit a systematic accounting of such factors to assess the relative contribution of each. However, it is indisputable that NLR had a devastating impact on the economic bargaining power of the dominant form of unionism in the United States. As a result, NLR created more space for the emergence of rival types in the U.S. than in Canada, other things being equal.

Summing up, for eight of the ten conditions listed in Table One, NLR shifts U.S. environmental conditions in directions that are more favorable to social movement unionism than the conditions that obtained
previously. For five of those conditions, this positive impact was substantial. This does not mean that other factors cannot partially offset or completely override these tendencies. We lack the space to explore systematically the most important factors other than NLR that impact each of these conditions. However, my preliminary efforts to think this through suggest that other factors reinforce the tendencies attributable to NLR more than they counteract them. In sum, the environmental conditions in the United States today favor a shift toward a more inclusive and critical form of unionism more than they have at any time since the 1930s. NLR can take a substantial part of the credit for this situation.

Evidence of a Shift Toward SMU in the United States due to NLR Change Along the Three Pathways

The first path runs from changes in the political and economic experiences of workers—especially union members—to changes in their sense of who shares their fate, and/or changes in the degree to which they believe that the existing political economic order can and must be changed in the name of social justice. The constraints and opportunities created by altered worker and member beliefs then drive or permit parallel changes in union leadership culture. Neoliberal policies were responsible for a substantial part—perhaps most—of the decline in the real wages of unskilled workers in the United States during the 1980s and most of the 1990s. In an effort to maintain family incomes, more and more women went into the workforce. The result was that NLR was associated with the growth of women and minority workers as a share the total workforce.

Most union membership growth in the neoliberal era took place in the service sector, where women and people of color make up an unusually large share of employment. As a result, these groups also grew as a share of all union members in these years. Such union members are likely to favor more inclusive unions, because they are members of groups that have long been marginalized, both within unions and in the wider society. The growth of these groups within unions also implies that a growing share of union members are concerned about racial, ethnic and gender forms of oppression as well as class oppression, and are active in other social movements that aim to address these issues. Their subordinate location in these hierarchies, as well as in segmented labor markets, makes them particularly likely to have a critical stance on the contemporary political economic order. These workers should therefore support a more inclusive and critical union culture in the
unions where they constitute a growing share of union membership.

The second pathway in Figure Two ran from the declining effectiveness of traditional (i.e. business) union organizing and collective bargaining methods owing to NLR, to strategic innovations with important (though often unforeseen) implications for union leadership cultures. The first widespread union response was a major increase in the number of union mergers. The second strategic response, which some unions—notably the UFCW and the SEIU—undertook in the 1980s, was a substantial increase in the share of union funds allocated to organizing, and increased experimentation with non-traditional approaches to union certification. While there were other strategic innovations in the neoliberal era, these were the ones with the most far-reaching (though as yet not fully realized) implications for union leadership cultures.

The wave of union mergers in the neoliberal era meant that, by the late 1990s, most of the largest and most powerful U.S. unions were no longer craft or industrial unions but “general” (or conglomerate) unions encompassing workers with varying skills in multiple occupations and sectors. Craft and industrial unions relied on common workplace skills and experiences to create a “community of interest” among their members, making solidaristic collective action easier. In general unions, however, this source of common identity, interest, and solidarity does not unite all members. As a result, Piore argues, general unions must either accept a lower level of mobilization capacity, or develop alternative sources of worker collective identity and commitment. In an insightful paper on the Service Employers International Union (SEIU), Piore argues that despite its appearance as a conglomerate union, par excellence, it is actually an organic organization; its diverse membership and its staff have a single identity and share a sense of common purpose and mission. The source of that identity is not their industry or occupation, but it is a moral vision. That moral vision comes out of the fact that the union is really composed of low income workers . . . and the helping professions. The professionals have a commitment to the people they serve which goes beyond mere income or career, and the low income workers, actual and potential, are an important part of the group to whom that commitment extends (Piore 1989, 29).

Such a culture does not naturally arise within general unions. The largest general union in the United States for many years was the Teamsters, and its dominant leadership culture was—and is—very different. The new collective identity that emerged in the SEIU in the
1980s was a social construction, promoted by John Sweeney and the team that he assembled around him after he became the union’s President in 1980. But leaders could not have developed the union’s identity in this direction had not the membership been predisposed to such a possibility by the nature of their work and group experiences, as Piore makes clear. Most Teamster members do not come from “the helping professions,” and for this reason it might very well be more difficult for equally motivated leaders to promote successfully a culture like that which Piore found in the SEIU.

A substantial increase in the share of union resources devoted to organizing the unorganized posed a much greater political challenge for business unions than a series of mergers with smaller unions. Under traditional business unionism, most union dues went to pay staff to provide collective bargaining, grievance and other “services” to members. The largest U.S. unions get about 75 percent of their operating income from member dues (Masters 1998, 14–15), so if union expenditures on organizing are to be substantially increased, either member dues must be substantially increased, or members must be persuaded to continue paying dues at past levels while performing more of the services for themselves. Neither is an easy sell, particularly to union members who have been encouraged to think that the reason why union officials receive salaries far in excess of the average earnings of their members is that they provide valuable services that members could not supply for themselves. While implicit, the idea that union spending and general operations ought to be shifted from a “servicing” to an “organizing” model is thus an assault on the self-understanding of business unions. Member resistance to efforts to move in this direction since 1995 makes it clear that, once established, business union leaders are by no means the sole source of this type of unionism (Hurd & Turner 2000).

Turning servicing over to members—assuming that they are persuaded to accept such a change—means that they must be motivated to take up the slack as volunteers. Member volunteers must also be found in large numbers to assist in local organizing drives because the resources freed up by having more member servicing are not enough to increase organizing on the scale required. Richard Bensinger, Director of the Organizing Institute from its founding, and of the AFL-CIO’s Department of Organizing from 1995 to 1998, put it well:

We will never have nearly enough professional organizers to organize the number of workers we need to [if union density is to be increased]. And if you look at history, that’s not how the labor movement organized in
the first place. We need more staff, and unions need to hire more organizers. But I think unless the fight is owned by the membership, and unless union leaders give ownership to the membership, it won’t succeed.

What is to motivate higher level, of member volunteerism? Bensinger links member volunteerism with “ownership,” meaning increased membership control over union decision-making. This is indeed important to sustaining high levels of member commitment. So the challenge posed by a large-scale increase in union organizing investment goes beyond business unionism’s self-understanding as a service-providing business to its internal power relations. Levels of member ownership and control are not the only factors affecting levels of membership commitment and volunteerism. As many observers have noted, major increases in member “ownership” have not taken place in most unions (Early 1999, Parker & Gruelle 1999, Tillman and Cummings 1999). Yet union membership volunteerism levels increased substantially in the 1980s. This implies that members are motivated by something other than increased rank-and-file and/or local control, such as an increased sense that the union is fighting for things they care about.

Successful organizing creates further challenges. Suddenly there are new voting members in the locals into which they are organized—or entirely new locals in some cases—and new leaders have been forged in the organizing process. If the organizers made heavy use of volunteer organizing committees in the workplace, or member mass mobilizations, if they built support for the organizing drive within the community by stressing the union as a force for inclusion and social justice, then these new members will have expectations about how their union should be run that are very different from business union traditions. The case of SEIU Local 399 in Los Angeles is a good example. The campaign succeeded in organizing 90 percent of the janitors working in the city’s commercial jurisdiction. In 1995, these new members became the base for a dissident slate, calling itself the Multiracial Alliance, that challenged the established leadership of Local 399 (Williams 1999). Such a dynamic is likely where new members are folded into existing locals still run on business union lines.

This brings us to the third pathway identified in the previous section: the impact of NLR on the competitiveness of business unions vis-à-vis rival union types. While one business union—the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW)—was able to achieve membership growth rates similar to those of the SEIU through a combination of mergers and organizing, it was the exception that proved the rule. In
the neoliberal era, the organizational bastions of business unionism suffered dramatic membership losses. In aggregate, U.S. union membership fell from 21 million in 1979 to 16.2 million (about 23 percent) in 1998. However, the growth of the public and private service sector unions masked much more severe losses by the unions in which business unionism had always been strongest—the building trades and the Teamsters. Industrial unions whose dominant leadership culture had been conservative at birth (e.g., USW and IUE), or had drifted towards a more conservative and exclusive vision in the 1980s (e.g., UAW), were even harder hit.

These dramatic declines had two important effects. First, in the neoliberal era, for the first time, the membership of the service sector unions (public and private sectors combined) exceeded that of the unions (building trades and manufacturing) that had dominated the AFL-CIO and the labor movement since the 1930s. This mattered because most service sector unions were gravitating toward more inclusive and critical positions, as exemplified by the evolution of the SEIU under Sweeney. Second, the industrial unions became increasingly critical of the direction in which the national and international political economies were moving. Some also became more inclusive as they sought to organize outside their traditional industrial boundaries to make up for lost members. In short, the leaders of most service sector and industrial unions responded to the traumas of the neoliberal era by becoming more inclusive, more critical, or both. The degree to which dissident rank-and-file pressures contributed to these shifts varied. They were critical in the SEIU, the Teamsters, and the UAW, and less important in unions such as HERE.

Impact on AFL-CIO Strategy and Policy

The culture of AFL-CIO leaders reflects the beliefs of the dominant coalition of its affiliates, albeit in a more qualified way (because of the desire to keep dissenters within the federation), and with a lag time (owing to the difficulty of displacing entrenched leaders at that level). Detailed interviews with AFL-CIO leaders would be the best way to explore this culture in detail, though we would still want to examine federation strategies and policies to see how closely they reflect leadership statements of belief, intent and desire. I have not been able to undertake many such interviews, so here I move directly to the evolution of relevant aspects of AFL-CIO strategy and policy.
The Old Guard’s strategy for recouping its economic and political power reflected business unionism’s logic of collective action. AFL-CIO President Lane Kirkland and his supporters did not believe that they could significantly increase union membership through organizing under the existing labor law, because it was too easy for employers to frustrate union organizing efforts, and employers were increasingly hostile to unions. Increasing union investment in organizing was therefore a waste of money in the absence of labor law reform. In any case, union members (customers) would not likely be willing to increase their commitments (dues, volunteer time) to their unions in a period of declining union economic bargaining power and performance (diminished services). Favorable changes in labor laws were only expected if the Democrats regained control of the White House (while maintaining control of both houses of Congress), and a significant segment of the business community was willing to support the reforms.

The AFL-CIO’s political strategy under Kirkland flowed from these premises. To put Democrats back in the White House and secure Congress, union PAC funding of the Democratic Party was dramatically increased in the 1980s. To persuade business to support labor law reform, unions would downplay their adversarial traditions, and become partners in the intensifying international competitive struggle. Labor’s contribution to this partnership would be greater flexibility in workplace organization, and the encouragement of productivity-enhancing employee “voice.” Implicit in this framing was an acceptance of the neoliberal rules of the domestic and international game. Arguably, this strategy was organized labor’s best hope for survival if it was assumed—as the Old Guard did—that most U.S. union members would not support a more inclusive or critical form of unionism.

The strategy seemed to have a chance of success when Bill Clinton was elected President in 1992. The Dunlop Commission was quickly constituted and mandated to explore the potential for a labor-business compromise on labor law reform. Both Houses of Congress were, of course, still in Democratic hands. Two years later, however, the strategy lay in ruins. Unions were divided on the advisability of the kind of compromise that Dunlop was exploring. Few employers seemed interested (Dunlop Commission 1994). Thus, on the Old Guard’s own premises, U.S. unions were doomed to continued decline. Meanwhile, President Clinton put more effort into pushing NAFTA through Congress—over the strong opposition of organized labor—than into fighting for any policy backed by labor. The coup de grace was the loss
of the Democratic majorities in the House and Senate in the November 1994 elections.

The discrediting of the Old Guard’s survival strategy was the precipitating cause of the New Voice slate’s challenge in the AFL-CIO elections of October 1995 (Meyerson 1998). However, the success of that challenge reflected the longer-term impacts of NLR and the union responses to it summarized above (Early 1999). How much more inclusive and critical have the policies of the AFL-CIO become since the triumph of the New Voice slate?

Three good indicators of increased inclusiveness are: (1) an expanded commitment of scarce union resources to helping unorganized workers, by investing more in organizing efforts, and by fighting for public policies that will benefit those who are not members; (2) new policies that demonstrate that women and minorities are welcome in unions, and reducing barriers to their rise to top leadership positions; and (3) policies that aim to change the rules of international competition in ways that will benefit workers in all countries, as opposed to those which aim to make U.S. workers more competitive relative to all other workers. The most important changes along these lines since 1995 have been:

- A substantial increases in AFL-CIO spending on organizing, and many institutional and strategic innovations (Union Cities, Union Summer, rethinking the role of central labor councils, etc.) aimed at encouraging affiliates to make similar commitments, promoting new organizing strategies, and disseminating organizing “best practices” widely and quickly (Cooper 1996, Early & Cohen 1997, Moberg 1997).
- An immediate increase in representation of women and minorities on AFL-CIO Executive Board.
- An intense and very public focus on the need for real increases in the minimum wage, and legislative successes in realizing this goal (Greenhouse 1996b, Greenhouse 1997).
- An important shift in the AFL-CIO’s long-standing position on illegal immigration, arguing for “blanket amnesty” for illegal immigrants and an end to most sanctions against employers who hire them (Greenhouse 2000).
- Increased outreach to students, university faculty, clergy, and social movement organizations with whom the AFL-CIO shares—and seeks
to expand—common ground on domestic and international policies (Greenhouse 1996a, Greenhouse 1996d, 1999b).

Union criticalness can pertain to the economic order, the political order, or both. On the economic side, deeper critiques focus on systemic features—capitalism per se, or neoliberal forms of market economy—rather than narrower features such as particular provisions of the labor law or particular corporate actors, or worker rights in the WTO. A more critical stance will directly challenge corporate power, rather than accommodating to it by endorsing “producer alliances” in the name of superior U.S. competitiveness. On the political side, a more critical standpoint might go beyond particular policies (e.g., campaign finance rules) and institutions (e.g., the two party system and the electoral system that keeps it in place) to raise questions about how democratic the society as a whole is (e.g., lack of democracy in workplaces, narrowing scope of political democracy as corporations, the Federal Reserve and WTO usurp more decision-making power). Another dimension of political criticalness is how efforts to communicate such critiques and build support for them are organized. Do these efforts focus primarily on electoral politics, with political parties and candidates as the principle vehicles, or are increased resources put into education and consciousness-raising aimed at engaging and challenging members and supporters? The most important changes along these lines since 1995 have been:

- Development of a discourse that targets transnational corporations (TNCs) as the principal architects of the neoliberal agenda, instead of treating them as partners in a competition with corporations (and workers) from other countries (Blackwell 1997).
- Increased participation in efforts to develop international and cross-movement consensus on alternatives to neoliberal model of globalization (e.g., AFL-CIO now participates in efforts of the Hemispheric Social Alliance, and challenges IMF and World Bank policies as well as trade policies such as NAFTA and WTO) (AFL-CIO 1999, 2000b, c).
- A shift in how union political money is spent: more is now devoted to member education about the issues and getting out the vote, rather than handed over to Democratic candidates and the party, though this could go much further than it has to date (Greenhouse 1999a, Hurd & Turner 2000).

These lists suggest that the AFL-CIO has moved further on the inclusiveness dimension than on the criticalness dimension since 1995. Put another way, it is probably best to characterize the central tendency of
the U.S. labor movement at this point as a form of social unionism, as indicated in Figure One. However, because it is also more critical that its predecessor, and because it continues to move in this direction, it is also accurate to say that the U.S. labor movement continues to move toward social movement unionism, even though it remains a long way from this ideal type. It is unlikely to move as far toward the SMU ideal type as unions in South Korea or South Africa, because the U.S.—even under NLR—is much further from the optimal conditions for SMU than these countries were in the 1970s and 1980s. Still, further movement in this direction does seem the best way of increasing U.S. labor movement power under NLR, and of putting that increased power to progressive ends.

Notes

1. The argument outlined here is elaborated in Volume One of a forthcoming two-volume study tentatively titled *North American Unions Under Neoliberal Restructuring: Union Character, Strategy, and Power, 1979–2000*. This volume, a national-level analysis of the labor movements of the three NAFTA countries, was co-written with Graciela Bensusán of FLACSO and Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana-Xochimilco in Mexico City. I have also benefitted greatly from the ideas of my collaborators on the second volume of this study, Maria Lorenza Cook (Cornell University), Gregor Murray (Laval University), and Bodil Damgaard, formerly at FLACSO and now at the Danish National Institute of Social Research. Volume Two examines the evolution of the strategies and power of the most important unions in three highly trade-impacted sectors of the NAFTA countries: auto, electronics, and apparel. Thanks also to Glenn Adler, Michael Dreiling, Howard Kimeldorf, Gabe Lenz, Bruce Nissen, Jeff Paige, Kim Scipes, and Mayer Zald for their comments on aspects of this paper presented in earlier forms.

2. “Neoliberal” economic policies flow from the following more or less explicitly articulated premises: (a) a competitive market form of economic regulation is generally the best means of increasing allocative efficiency, (b) increased allocative efficiency is the best way to promote aggregate economic growth, and (c) maximizing economic growth (as opposed to, say, meeting the basic needs of all or minimizing poverty or reducing economic inequality) ought to be the principal goal of economic policy. These claims derive most of their intellectual support from the dominant—if not quite hegemonic—neoclassical strand of academic economics. Neoliberal “restructuring” refers to changes in economic institutions, rules, and dynamics that can be directly traced to neoliberal economic policies.


4. Worker collective identities are those groups (family, workplace, class, race, ethnic, linguistic, religious, national, etc.) with which workers strongly identify. Worker political economies have both a cognitive and a normative component. The cognitive component consists of beliefs concerning how the existing political and economic systems work, and what kinds of alternative systems are possible. The normative component consists of judgements concerning the justness and fairness of the existing political economy, and which (if any) of the feasible alternatives to this order is ethically superior.

5. Union leadership is defined broadly to include all who are active within the union, whether elected or not, paid or not. Not all leaders are members (e.g., staffers involved in strategy development can be important leaders on some issues), and many members
are not leaders. However, there is substantial overlap between the two categories in voluntary, autonomous unions.

6. Labor movements have unions at their core, but they include other organizations that share the defining goals of the movement. These may include political parties allied with organized labor, as well as worker education institutions, cooperatives, think tanks, and so on (Montgomery 1980). As with other social movements, the labor movement also extends beyond organizations to include sympathizers and supporters. While not organized and mobilized to advance the cause, this “outer ring” of the movement supports its basic goals at the voting booth and in public opinion surveys. These kinds of support can change the behavior of economic and political elites (McCarthy & Zald 1977).

7. Union leaders who see part of their mission as the promotion of democracy often understand this to be in the interests of all citizens, not just the working class. Union leaders engaged in nationalist or anti-colonial struggles also see themselves as speaking for, and at least somewhat accountable to, a national community. Union in which socialist or communist ideas are powerful cultural influences on leaders see their responsibility extending beyond national boundaries to an international working class.

8. While the political system and the economic system are deeply intertwined, it is possible to be highly critical of one but not the other. As discussed in the next footnote, the dominant tendency within the Swedish labor movement has accepted the legitimacy of that nation’s political system since the 1930s. But it did not accept the capitalist basis of the Swedish economy, and sought to transform it through a scheme of wage-earner funds in the late 1970s (Pontusson 1992).

9. Union criticalness, as the term is employed here, is a relative concept. The Swedish blue collar unions largely accept the basic legitimacy of the Swedish political system. But that is a system in which unelected courts have very limited power relative to the elected legislature, the electoral system involves proportional representation, more than one political party has strong ties to unions, and campaign finance laws minimize differences of political influence that would otherwise flow from inequalities of income and wealth. If we imagine these unions transplanted to the United States with their ideas of a just political order intact, they would be political radicals calling for fundamental constitutional changes.

10. For example, Golden reports that the more radical Italian unions that she studied were not interested in inclusive organizing. As one Turinese metalworkers’ union official put it, “If we had 60 per cent [of the workers] at Fiat [as members of our union], we would be a moderate union” (Golden, 1988: 218). For “radical” as she uses the term, we would substitute the term “sectarian.” The effort to combine criticalness (i.e., a highly critical orientation to existing institutions) and inclusiveness, despite the tensions between them, distinguishes social movement from sectarian unions.

11. We cannot say “all” such unions because many shift from their sectarian origins to become more inclusive over time. It may seem odd to characterize the Catholic unions as critical. However, a critical perspective on the current order can be conservative or progressive in nature. Catholic critiques of capitalism have exhibited both types of critique in different places and times. The conservative versions are more common, better known, and once again in the ascendency, but the Catholic “base communities” that flourished in Brazil and Nicaragua, inspired in part by the theology of liberation, are an important example of a progressive critique rooted in Catholic social thought.


13. We use “political opportunity structure” (POS) in the objective sense of that term found in social movement analyses such as and. Economic opportunity structure (EOS) is a parallel concept developed by Robinson and his co-authors in their comparative analysis of North American labor movements under neoliberal restructuring (see footnote 1). Just as POS is a set of structural factors that affect unions’ capacity to change state policy, so EOS is a set of structural factors that affect unions’ capacity to transform their power resources into collective bargaining power with employers.
14. Conditions that were important in particular cases, but less general in application, are not included in the table. For example, a number of authors have pointed to the rapid growth of an urban, semi-skilled industrial proletariat, in a manufacturing sector protected from international competition as part of the state’s import substitution industrialization strategy, as a key factor in the emergence and subsequent dominance of social movement unionism in South Africa and Brazil (Adler 1996, Seidman 1994). While undoubtedly important in these cases and some others (e.g., South Korea), the rapid growth of this type of worker does not seem to have been an important part of the rise of SMU in Spain or Nicaragua in the 1970s or in Poland in the 1980s. Nor, Scipes argues, is SMU in the Philippines more deeply rooted in protected industries than in the agricultural sector and the export processing zones that began to expand rapidly in the Marcos era (Scipes 1996).

15. The criterion of democratic quality employed in making this judgement is taken from Dahl, who argues that in the ideal democracy, the concerns of all citizens should have equal weight in the democratic decision-making process (Dahl 1989). The further we move away from this ideal, the lower the quality of democracy.

16. On the impact of increased international capital mobility on union economic bargaining power in the United States, see (Bronfenbrenner 1997). For a more general argument that applies to unions in the global North and South alike, see (Rodrik 1997, Chapter 2).

17. Business unions have lower levels of societal mobilization capacity than social unions because they include a much smaller share of the workforce as members who might be mobilized. They have lower mobilization capacity levels than SMUs both for this reason and for a second: business unions cannot call on the same level of commitment from their members. This is because it is easier to mobilize people to fight perceived injustices than to defend a status quo that they broadly endorse. This is a general problem of “consensus” movement organizations (Schwartz & Paul 1992).

18. Union density is measured differently in different countries. But the core concept is union membership as a share of the total workforce that could legally belong to unions (i.e., excluding managers, business owners, and family farmers).

19. Member volunteerism levels—the share of the union’s members who volunteer time to union activities—are used here as an indicator of the percentage of members who have a significant commitment to their unions. On union member commitment and the factors that motivate it, see (Kelly & Kelly 1994, Kelly & Heery 1994, Kuruvilla et al. 1993, Kuruvilla & Sverke 1993, Sverke 1995, Sverke & Sjoberg 1994).

20. The labor movement’s societal mobilization capacity is the share of the society’s labor force that are committed supporters of the unions to which they belong. This is estimated as the product of union density and membership volunteerism levels for 1989.

21. Shalev argues that “relative involvement” (i.e., the number of workers involved in stoppages per thousand employees in the workforce) is the best single measure of strike levels for comparative purposes. (Shalev 1992).

22. The size of the gap in the growth rate of real worker compensation (wages + benefits), relative to labor productivity, is a good indicator of union bargaining power with employers. If the gap is zero, compensation rises at the same rate as productivity and profits, so that both parties improve their situation without any redistribution in the shares going to capital (profits) and labor (compensation). We focus on the manufacturing sector because it has the highest productivity growth, the strongest unions, and the highest wages for unskilled workers. It is also the sector most affected by the intensified international competition and capital mobility that results from neoliberal trade policies.

23. After falling in real terms since the early 1970s, the wages of unskilled workers in the United States finally began to pick up in 1997, as unemployment levels fell below 5 percent (Passell 1998). There is heated debate over the precise contribution of trade liberalization to these wage trends (Bound & Johnson 1995, Kapstein 1996, Lawrence 1998, Leamer 1995, Wood 1994). However, all of the participants in these debates con-
cede that trade liberalization accounts for a substantial share of the increase in income inequality and poverty. A figure of 25–30 percent has become popular among economists who promote neoliberal trade agreements, and who might therefore be expected to wish to minimize its negative impacts on wages. If we assume, as they do not, that declining manufacturing sector union density and increased substitution of capital for unskilled labor are also related to trade liberalization and increased international capital mobility, the figure would rise a good deal more. If we then added the effects of another neoliberal policy—very high real interest rates designed to discipline organized labor by keeping unemployment relatively high—the figure might well climb to over half.

24. At the outset of the neoliberal era, women made up about 41.6 percent of the U.S. workforce, but by 1997 they made up more than 49 percent. In 1997, Blacks and Hispanics accounted for 9.6 and 8.5 percent of the workforce, respectively. White males accounted for 44.2 percent of the workforce in 1997. A Bureau of Labor Statistics study estimates that by 2005, 87.5 percent of new entrants into the workforce will be either minorities or women (Kim 1993).

25. In 1978, about 28 percent of union members were women; by 1997, 39.4 percent were. In 1997, Blacks and Hispanics accounted for 14.9 and 8.7 percent of union members, respectively. White males accounted for 50.7 percent of union members in 1997 (Hirsch & Macpherson 1998).

26. The most common kind of merger was what Chaisson calls “absorptions,” in which a large union merges with a much smaller union. There were 21 absorptions (2.3 per year) between 1970 and 1979, and 52 (3.7 per year) between 1980 and 1994 (Chaisson 1996, 25).

27. The degree to which a common skill, or working in a common industry, generates a sense of common identity and interest among union members can easily be exaggerated. Still, the number of sources of difference among members in a general union will normally be even larger than those in industrial or craft unions. So I would grant Piore’s premise that the challenge of building common identity is greatest in general unions, though I would not place too much weight on the difference.

28. It can, however, be done. Within a couple of years of becoming International President of the SEIU in 1980, John Sweeney expanded its staff from 20 to 200. To fund this expansion, Sweeney persuaded members to double the SEIU’s per capita dues, traditionally the lowest in the AFL-CIO, from $4 to $8 per month (Piore 1989, 26).

29. The quote is from (Bacon 1997), cited in (Eisenschel 1999). Bensinger was fired in 1998 probably for speaking too candidly and critically on these themes for the tastes of many union leaders.

30. One reason for the slow pace is that in unions with a long tradition of business unionism, many members have been socialized into accepting its defining assumptions about what their unions should do and how they should do these things. In such cases, increasing local membership control before changing this culture might frustrate leadership efforts to shift resources from servicing to organizing. Jimmy Hoffa, Jr.’s victory in the recent Teamsters elections should underscore this point. Many Teamsters evidently think that a union’s strength depends as much on a “strong” leader, as it does on democratic reforms (Greenhouse 1996c, 1998). How do the cultures of very large organizations like U.S. unions get changed? Leadership is essential, though it will be much more effective if, as was the case in the Teamsters, it can work in tandem with rank-and-file movements for change. The Teamsters was characterized by this ideal reform situation from 1991 to 1998, yet seven years of sustained effort by dedicated reformers was not enough to turn a majority of Teamster members—or even a majority of the minority who cast ballots—into active supporters of the reformers’ idea of good unionism and good leadership. On the other hand, to win Hoffa was forced to adopt many planks of the reformers’ agenda (e.g., cutting multiple salaries), so the efforts of the reformers did have an important impact on what members came to demand of their leaders.
31. Analysis of the sources of variation in levels of union member participation indicate that members are motivated to participate for a variety of reasons. On this, see the references in Footnote 19. Among the most important reasons are a belief that the movement’s goals are morally and politically important, and a belief that the movement’s strategies for realizing those goals have some reasonable prospect of success. Data from the World Values Surveys indicate that the share of union members who were volunteering time to their union without pay increased from 6.8 percent in 1981 to 18.6 percent in 1990, a 173.5 percent increase. Union member volunteerism in Canada rose from 13.6 to 26.5 percent, a 95 percent increase, over the same period. That the rate of volunteerism rose more quickly in the United States implies that larger changes in union orientation took place there than in Canada. That Canadian volunteerism levels in 1990 were still 42 percent higher than those in the United States suggests that Canadian union and labor movement goals continue to motivate higher levels of member commitment.

32. The initial response of the SEIU International Executive Board was to place Local 399 under trusteeship. It is hard to imagine that this would not have a serious dampening effect on the energies and commitments built during the organizing process. If so, such a reaction undermines the momentum of the organizing victory that precipitated the political crisis of Local 399.

33. Between 1978 and 1997, the Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) lost 20 percent of its members, the Operating Engineers (IUOE) and the Plumbers both lost about one third of their members, the Laborers (LIUNA) lost 46 percent, and the Carpenters, 56 percent of their members. Between 1975 and 1987, when the Old Guard were still in charge of the Teamsters, it lost one third of its members.

34. Between 1978 and 1997, the membership of the United Auto Workers (UAW) fell by 49 percent, that of the International Union of Electrical Workers (IUE) by 50 percent, and that of the Steelworkers by 60 percent.

35. The largest unions within the AFL-CIO dominate its policy making. In 1978, of the 20 largest unions in the United States, 18 were affiliated with the AFL-CIO, accounting for 67 percent of its members. At that point, 10 manufacturing and building trades unions in this group accounted for 61 percent of the members—and the votes—of the 18 affiliates. By 1997, with the Teamsters re-affiliated to the AFL-CIO, 19 if the 20 largest unions (the exception was the NEA) were affiliated with the AFL-CIO. Within this group, the manufacturing and building trades unions together accounted for only 38 percent of the members and votes. (Data for 1978, (Troy, 1985, 3–16); data for 1997, AFL-CIO, unpublished data. Data for NEA (1988, 1997) from the Membership Records Dept of the NEA National Office in Washington, D.C. In all cases, these data are for dues-paying members.)


37. The “down with adversarialism, up with voice” strategy was first articulated in the report of the AFL-CIO’s Committee on the Evolution of Work (AFL-CIO 1985). Harvard labor economist Richard Freeman, who served on the Committee, developed the idea of unions as worker voice at about the same time (Freeman & Medoff 1984).

38. The Teamsters’ General Counsel Judith Smith, Communications Workers (CWA) Organizing Director Larry Cohen, and OCAW President Robert Wages were all critical of such a trade-off in their testimony to the Dunlop Commission (Boal 1994).

39. The report noted that the Commission heard from “many business representatives who believe that the current law is working well, at least for the vast bulk of employers and workers, and does not need any major revision.” These businesses, the report went on, condemned the illegal actions of (a growing number of) employers, but saw the remedy as improved enforcement rather than more basic innovations (Dunlop Commission 1994, 76).

40. SIEU President John Sweeney, who led the New Voice slate, won 7.3 million votes (56 percent) to Tom Donohue’s 5.7 million. The difference—about 1.6 million votes—was equivalent to the Teamster’s block vote (1.3 million) plus one medium-sized
union of 300,000 members (e.g., UNITE!). Sweeney’s core supporters were industrial unions in which social unionism enjoyed a revival (UAW, USW, IAM, UMW), and service sector unions that moved in this direction (AFSCME, SEIU, and after Ron Carey’s 1991 victory, the Teamsters). The core supporters of Donohue, the Old Guard candidate, were most building trades unions, UFCW, CWA, HERE and AFT (Sweeney & Kusnet 1996).

41. They secured the convention’s support for the creation of a third full-time executive position—Executive Vice-President—to be filled by Linda Chavez-Thompson, formerly a Vice-President in AFSCME. They also expanded the Federation’s Executive Council from 35 to 54 members. This expanded the representation of women and minorities on this key body, from 17 percent of the total under the old system to 27 percent.

References


Strategic Responses to Neoliberal Restructuring, 22nd International Congress of the Latin American Studies Association.


