ORGANIZING FOR (SPARE) CHANGE?
A RADICAL POLITICS FOR AMERICAN LABOR

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Union renewal in the United States has been framed as an organizing project. But will “reinvesting in organizing” be enough to reverse membership decline and the growing marginality of organized labor as a social and political force? This article focuses on the comparative experience of labor movements in different countries, showing the importance of strategies broader than the shift from business unionism. Most important are unions’ ability to organize the margins of the labor market (at the point of unemployment), to act collectively across local union organizations and police their own labor standards, and to pursue political and institutional change through social movements of noncompliance and resistance.

Since the New Voice platform’s election to office in 1995, organized labor’s new scripture has had only one commandment: “Thou shalt organize!” It has become the measuring rod of successful reform for labor movement institutions, a hue and war cry for the proud, the basic building block for union bumper-sticker phraseology (“Changing to Organize, Organizing to Change!”), and a clear license to heap ridicule on those philistine purveyors of stultification who, we suspect, are responsible for our present situation: Old Labor.

The New Voice’s program for labor renewal has unfolded as a growing package of national initiatives designed to inspire (or frighten) local and international unions into shifting resources toward the organization of new members, to initiate (or rehabilitate) the role of community groups and coalitions in supporting local organizing efforts, and to assume an active role in shaping political agendas to support workers’ “right to organize.” It has rejected a focus on “legalistic” tactics attempting to change the labor laws constraining organizing activities, eschewing D.C.-based lobbying efforts and shelving fundamental legal reform as a long-term goal that can only be won by a larger, stronger, and more vivacious labor movement.

Progressives in the labor movement, although welcoming the change that 1995 brought, have criticized the AFL-CIO’s new direction, broadly, along two lines: first, they have noticed that “changing to organize” rarely means addressing problems with the internal organization of the unions themselves—rank-and-file disenfranchise, traditions of demobilization, top-down decision making, gender and racial inequality in leadership positions, etc.—and they
argue that a reversal of labor’s fortunes is unlikely unless unions become institutions that workers can own and that they will actually want to belong to. Second, progressives have questioned the tactics that the AFL-CIO, national, and local unions have broadly relied on in attempting to orchestrate the new organizing imperative. For example, the Organizing Institute’s recruitment of recent college graduates who subsequently fill the growing ranks of a wandering cadre of organizers-on-demand is seen for many reasons as a poor and ill-advised substitute for the transformation of locals into “organizing unions,” with rank-and-file control over and involvement in the organizing process.

Implicit in these varying prescriptions for renewal of the labor movement are interpretations of what went wrong—or has always been wrong—with organized labor in the United States. A standard shopping list of the causes of decline (the “usual suspects”) involves economic factors such as the shift of employment from manufacturing to service industries; the increase of global competition and capital mobility, often because of deregulation of markets and privatization initiatives; changes in the organization of work that have expanded “nonstandard” work such as flex, contingent, part-time, temp, and contract labor; an employer offensive, particularly dating from the late 1970s and early 1980s; legal obstacles to organizing, such as the Taft-Hartley Act of 1947, many of which facilitate employer opposition; and declining union effort and political power, both of which have reinforced one another. Progressive historical narratives tend to emphasize the internal organization and political track record of unions—not just the decline of effort and political power, but exclusivist cultures and membership policies, as well as a failure to take up important working class political struggles (closely linked with the purging of socialist and communist leadership from unions in the 1950s).

In sum, authors who are either sympathetic to or contributing members of the New Voice renewal program recognize the influence of “external” factors such as economic change and labor law on union decline, but for the most part they treat these as variables that organized labor has no power to change at present. Instead, they focus on the “decline of effort” among unions—in particular, unions’ organizing activity—and have placed reversal of this trend at the center of their program for revitalizing the labor movement. Progressives, while also cognizant of “external” factors, have generally left the New Voice focus on organizing unchallenged, but have argued that organizing simply would not work without significant reform of unions’ internal organization and how they relate to other community groups and political institutions.

Common among contributions to the organizing literature is a tendency toward Americocentric analysis in explaining union decline: instead of comparing different countries’ struggles to build strong, robust, and active labor movements and attempting to ascertain what features are shared by those movements that have succeeded, or those that have failed, organizing theorists will focus on what features of the economy or labor movement in the United States have corresponded with or precipitated periods of decline in the United States. This practice can lead to misleading conclusions, as many of the “external” circumstances
that have devastated unions in the U.S. other labor movements have weathered or even thrived on, and many of the “internal” explanations for decline—such as low levels of organizing effort or lack of democratic control by members—have little or no explanatory power when comparing the strength of organized labor in different countries.

Based on international evidence, this paper will argue that reinvesting in the organization of new members does not in itself work. Additionally, issues of internal organization of the sort that progressives tend to highlight—while vitally important in determining whether a union will be a good union, serving the interests of its membership and working people—also have little to do with labor’s decline in the United States (or anywhere else) and by themselves will offer little in the way of renewal. Finally, the progressive advocacy of localism and decentralization of power and resources within the labor movement, while understandably a reaction to labor’s historically conservative central institutions, will be criticized as a major cause of labor decline and a source of inequality among working people.

Focusing on what comparative labor studies can tell us about approaches to labor renewal in the United States and drawing on the research of “institutional” analysis will provide us with an alternative narrative of union decline in the U.S. one which brings with it a different set of imperatives for orchestrating a labor renaissance.

**The New Voice for American Labor and the Organizing Imperative**

Prior to the contested election of 1995, the presidency of the AFL-CIO had been what Harold Meyerson calls “the single safest job in America”: the position had never been contested since the founding of the AFL in 1886, and had seen four presidents over the course of 109 years—a span of time that brought us twenty sitting presidents of the United States, and nine popes of the Catholic Church! The late century eruption of internal debate and self-reflection on the part of the labor movement hinged, in large part, on the recognition that American labor was in decline—a statistical fact, the dire implications of which had been denied by both previous presidents. John Sweeney, the New Voice presidential candidate, finally admitted that “we are irrelevant to the vast majority of the unorganized workers in our country, and I have deep suspicions that we are becoming irrelevant to many of our own members.”

The disputed ’95 election also brought into question the strategies through which labor was pursuing its goals. Sweeney accused the AFL of having become “a Washington-based institution instead of a worker-based movement.” The New Voice program of proposed reform was sweeping, if somewhat ill defined. Although there have been administrative alterations—the expansion of the executive council, the addition of an executive vice-president position—most substantive initiatives have revolved around reorienting unions at all levels toward organizing, and reengaging organizers in the electoral process (as opposed to just cutting checks for “labor-friendly” politicians).
The drive to step up new membership organizing took several forms. The most straightforward initiative, and the one that has proven the most difficult to make significant progress on, has been an attempt to reallocate at least 30 percent of unions’ resources—at the federation, international, and local levels—to organizing. This program of “Changing to Organize” (the elongated, palindromic version being “Changing to Organize, Organizing to Change!”) has become one of the concerns of a newly created Organizing Department. However, the AFL-CIO has no direct control over internationals’ or locals’ budgetary priorities—so the campaign has been a very, very slowly moving one of suggestion and intangible pressure from above.

Such a transformation is easier said than done, though. Most locals do not have organizers, and do not organize new members in any systematic or strategic fashion. Bill Fletcher, Jr. and Richard Hurd have described, for example, how attempts to shift resources and time at the local level towards external organizing usually involve a significant erosion of membership services, and the remaining services then have to be carried out more and more on a volunteer basis by shop stewards or other members. This also tends to create a polarized internal atmosphere, in which staff organizers on the one hand and members overloaded with internal servicing tasks on the other begin to resent one another and compete for resources and priority. The smaller the union, or the lower its income per member (which means particularly unions representing low-wage workers), the more this becomes a Catch-22. So, although enthusiasts latch onto the success stories, as a general rule the tens of thousands of union locals have not begun—or have not been able to begin—organizing. The total number of workers voting in union certification elections, as a percentage of both the nonunion and union workforce, did not grow in the years following the New Voice succession, and neither has the decline in union density abated—even though as this figure approaches zero, it takes less and less organizing to maintain a steady rate of union density.

The other side of this attempt to renew organizing activity has been the expansion of organizer training and recruitment programs, including the establishment in 1996 of a “Union Summer” program that involved three-week training programs particularly for students who would potentially enroll in the Organizing Institute to become organizers. The Organizing Institute itself was expanded to train more organizers per year, about 65 percent of whom have been rank-and-file members of affiliated unions, and most of the rest were recent college graduates. This constitutes the supply side, as it were, of the drive to get locals and internationals to expand their organizing staff, providing a trained workforce that could fill newly created organizing positions.

The second major line of reform has been to rejuvenate unions’ political activism, attempting to shape the political arena instead of simply cutting a check to the least offensive candidate. It has become clear that the major goal of political activism here is actually to support organizing. Meyerson has noted that “the new sine qua non for supporting a candidate is that candidate’s support for union organizing efforts.”
Besides “holding politicians accountable” if they wish to gain the support of labor, the AFL-CIO has attempted both to train union members as campaign managers, and to put them forth as candidates at various levels of government, from school districts to city and state representative bodies. There have been efforts to improve the abysmal voter turnout of union families—which in 1994 was actually lower than that of nonunion families: 40 percent of the AFL-CIO’s members are not registered to vote, 40 percent of those who are do not actually turn out to the polls, and 39 percent of those who do, vote Republican.8 The inability of unions to turn out their membership at the polls has been one traditional explanation for the Democratic Party’s drift to the center, because a labor movement that cannot bring in votes for Democratic candidates—even when it wants to—will presumably have less pull over the platform than will blocs of corporate investors able to contribute large sums to campaign finances.

So there is an attempt at a pincer movement: on the one hand to hold candidates more accountable on union issues (especially regarding the right to organize), as well as to place more actual union members on the sleight, and on the other hand to increase labor’s capacity to campaign for and elect candidates willing to back workers’ issues.

The AFL-CIO launched a “2,000 in 2000” campaign, to run at least 2,000 union candidates for various offices around the country by the year 2000—a goal it met and exceeded (although this count includes even very local and very low-level positions, on town councils, school panels, and the like). Its Labor ’96 campaign involved an unprecedented mobilization for and investment in the Democratic Party during that year’s elections. That election was considered particularly important given that the perceived unresponsiveness of the AFL-CIO’s previous leadership to sweeping Republican wins in the ’94 elections had prompted the New Voice coup.

The new organizing paradigm has not aimed to significantly mobilize its membership on behalf of legal or institutional reforms. As Richard Bensinger put it, “While we still have plans to work toward enacting decent labor law, this is a long-term goal and does little to help the millions of workers who need a union now.”9 The editors of Organizing to Win—one of the central texts of the organizing literature—have written that, following the disappointing and weak-kneed recommendations for labor law reform by the 1993 Dunlop Commission under Clinton, “American labor leaders were faced with the grim reality that substantive labor law reform, no matter how badly it was needed or how well it was justified, could not be achieved without first significantly expanding labor’s political power through massive new organizing of unorganized workers.”10 This is the substantive element of Sweeney’s criticism that Old Labor had let the Federation degenerate to the status of a D.C.-based lobbying interest: the New Voice is investing in politics, but primarily to support organizing. Faith in the long-run ability of organizing to reverse union decline is the basis for believing that, when unions choose to take up the struggle for labor law reform, they will be better equipped then than they are now. When we hear that politicians need to be held “accountable” to their labor con-
stituencies, it is to the priorities of organizing that they are primarily accountable and not to reform efforts.

From Left Field: The Progressive Critique and Democratization

The progressive critique of New Voice reform has largely rested on two charges: the first is that democratizing unions does not simply imply the establishment of democratic “constitutions and by-laws.” Workers need not only to elect their officers and representatives, but they need to be able to effectively control their union and set its agenda. In particular, this revolves around the relationship between unions’ full-time staff and the rank-and-file, and whether staff are de facto setting unions’ agendas, or aggregating to themselves the task of organizing new workers. Secondly, progressives urge that the substantive politics of unions affect their ability to attract new members. Workers will not be drawn to a labor movement that is not championing and trying to win fundamental working-class issues in the public arena. This concern tends to revolve around American labor’s ambiguous relationship to the Democratic Party, the AFL-CIO’s rhetoric of holding politicians accountable, and yet its unwillingness to pull the plug on Democratic candidates who support patently antilabor positions on trade law, privatization, health care, and other policy issues.

Progressives tend to champion grassroots localism and the decentralization of resources and decision making as primary means to remedy the two above failings of New Voice (as well as Old Labor) unionism. Both ailments are symptoms of bureaucracy that has taken on a life of its own, no longer serving the interests of a membership, but, for all functional purposes, defining the interests of the membership, and assuming and professionalizing the pursuit of those interests. If bureaucratic functions can be brought under the democratic control of the membership, and workers can exercise not only ownership over but participation in the life of their unions, this will act as a check to run away professional staff agendas, support a revitalization of rank-and-file activism, and provide an actually promising option for nonunion workers to fight for better lives for themselves and a better society for the nation they live in. Therefore, grassroots control would constitute an important precondition for any reversal of membership decline, and would also bring with it a realignment of labor’s political agenda (and perhaps of its political audacity, as well).

Jeremy Brecher and Tim Costello have called for the following changes:

Unions at every level need to be run more by rank-and-file workers and less by full-time officials; to guarantee freedom of speech and association without the threat of reprisal; to provide direct elections of top union officials by all union members; and to ensure rank-and-file negotiation and ratification of contracts. New AFL-CIO structures should support rank-and-file empowerment, not re-centralization of authority.\textsuperscript{11}

This strategic need for participatory democratic, grassroots unionism has also been central for the organizing literature’s findings. By surveying unions’
use of different strategies in certification and first-contract campaigns, and comparing the success rates of unions taking different approaches—or a combination of different approaches—Kate Bronfenbrenner has found that “union success in certification election and first-contract campaigns depends on using an aggressive grassroots rank-and-file strategy focused on building a union and acting like a union from the very beginning of the campaign.” The more “rank-and-file-intensive tactics” a union uses during an organizing campaign—such as using rank-and-file volunteers for organizing, holding rallies, job actions, forming a representative committee, etc.—“the greater likelihood that the union will win the election, even in a climate of intense employer opposition.”

The AFL-CIO’s actual approach to increasing organizing activity, on the other hand, has been criticized as reflecting a “top-down” approach that is not always focused on the development of “organizing locals.” Steve Early, international rep for the CWA District 1, has taken the Organizing Institute (OI) to task for its focus on college campus recruitment, and its attempt to draw the expanded ranks of organizers from academia. The OI is effectively creating a cadre of “mobile organizers,” not rooted in a community of workers or linked to a rank-and-file base, to be “parachuted” into targeted organizing sites.

Progressives charge that a grassroots, bottom-up approach to labor renewal is needed. This means reactivating worker engagement in the lives of their unions—a change that can occur only with the democratization of labor institutions in the sense that workers actually gain control of and exercise ownership over the decision-making processes and activities of unions. This transformation will not occur via a policy change within the AFL-CIO or the internationals, but these peak organizations could play an important role in helping to facilitate grassroots reform. Additionally, the real work of reversing union decline will occur at this grassroots level, and the federation and internationals would do better to decentralize their resources—getting them to the locals most in need of access to organizing resources—instead of spinning out new, supposedly more progressive bureaucratic institutions and initiatives that will not contribute significantly to meeting the fundamental grassroots challenge.

Three Easy Steps to a Successful and Profitable Trade Union (or How to Overcome the Slings and Arrows of Outrageous Fortune)

Many of the explanations of decline and approaches to union strategy reviewed above rely on a dichotomy between internal and external factors. External causes are, broadly, economic (increasing capital mobility, nonstandard work, technological substitution, sectoral or occupational shifts in employment, or the more short-term impacts of cyclical economic changes like unemployment or inflation), legal (right-to-work, weak penalties for unfair labor practices, ability to stall first-contracts in red tape, limits on organizers contacting workers on site, etc.), political (enforcement of labor laws, appointment of unfriendly officers to NLRB, willingness to suppress wildcat strikes), and social (employers’ anti-union offensive, public opinion distrustful of unions).
Internal issues often spring from the dispute over business unionism—a culture of servicing vs. one of organizing and all that this entails: resource allocation, organizing effort, or cultures of exclusivity and antagonism toward nonunion workers in the same occupation. Progressives tend to highlight a set of internal categories that go beyond the business unionism debate, pointing for example to internal democracy (whether business or organizing union), the level of rank-and-file control and mobilization, the substantive political positions pursued by unions as well as the level of political activism, willingness to adopt concession bargaining during hard times, the location of organizing initiatives (grassroots or more bureaucratic), and the “sovereignty” of locals with respect to the internationals or the AFL-CIO (especially in the case of wildcat strikes).

Recent competing approaches to union renewal in the American labor movement share an “inward turn” in strategic priorities: bracketing struggles to alter the external environment as either “long-term” goals, or unachievable goals without significant internal reforms of budgetary allocation, union culture, political commitments, or levels of mobilization. All parties recognize the importance of the “external” causes of decline listed above, but these are at the same time forlornly set beyond the reach of labor activism, at least in its present weakened state. We can no more limit capital mobility at this stage than we can halt the employer offensive that began during the Reagan era; it is thought. And, as evidenced by a series of abysmal defeats and disappointments at the legislative and executive levels, even under a Democratic president and Congress, we simply lack the political clout to win labor law reforms.

However, the internal–external dichotomy is not an adequate framework for understanding the causes of union decline, nor within which to strategize a comeback for the American labor movement. This inadequacy becomes clear when one compares the history of labor movements in different countries, and attempts to explain their relative success or failure at expanding their membership, political power, economic clout, and/or social influence. An example will clarify the situation.

Prior to the emergence of welfare states providing broad-based social services, it was common for unions (most of which initially represented only higher-wage, skilled occupations) to provide many of these services on a limited basis for their membership—unemployment benefits, disability, bereavement, etc. In some countries when local and national governments began offering unemployment insurance schemes, unemployment benefits provided by the state continued to be distributed by unions. This practice, called the “Ghent system,” was widely adopted beginning from the early 1900s. By the end of WWII, however, only four countries—Belgium, Denmark, Sweden, and Finland—still retained national Ghent systems in which unions played a crucial role in the distribution and administration of unemployment benefits.15

Union disbursal of unemployment benefits leads to a drastic change in how periods of high unemployment impact union density. In the Scandinavian countries where national Ghent systems generally prevailed, we find cases where
climbing unemployment, as during the late 1970s and early 1980s, led to a rapid acceleration in the growth of union density. Particularly dramatic is the case of the Netherlands, which, after replacing union-disbursed unemployment benefits in 1952, immediately thereafter saw a diverging rate of union growth from Belgium and other Ghent countries, a divergence that accelerated during subsequent periods of high unemployment. Similarly, the difference in union density growth rate between Sweden and Norway sharply diverged after Norway abandoned the Ghent system in 1938.16

Unemployment—like capital mobility, labor-saving technology, or an employer offensive—might be viewed as an “external” factor impacting union density. But countries are clearly not at the whim of unemployment effects on union power, even if we assume that they cannot actually change the level of unemployment to their liking. The effects of unemployment—like other “external” factors—are filtered through social institutions, institutions not captured by the internal categories of the organizing or progressive approaches. In the case of the Ghent system, union involvement with the “street-level delivery of services,” as Bruce Western puts it, has a profound impact on how workers at the periphery of the labor market interact with unions. Only where the labor movement is institutionally cut off from the periphery of the labor market does this class of workers fall, largely, beyond the reach of unions. But such labor market institutions are not inevitabilities, and are in all cases the outcomes of political struggle.

One lesson here is that labor movements do not always have to change what seem to be immutable external conditions in order to affect how they impact on union strength. There are social institutions that impact how unions will grow or decline under otherwise similar conditions even more important than benefit disbursal. Bruce Western has conducted the most comprehensive study to date of the postwar trajectory of OECD countries’ labor movements. He has found three distinct patterns of union growth, with only one country (Italy) falling well outside these various patterns. In none of these cases is density destiny. That is to say, the countries with higher density in 1950 were not necessarily those with high density in 1980, or afterwards. And during the postwar period, there has been a strong tendency for union densities to diverge—for the average difference between countries’ density levels to grow larger over time, with some declining and others rising.17

The first group of countries, which includes Belgium, Denmark, Finland, and Sweden, has seen steady and seemingly inexorable union growth over the postwar period—all four now exceed 80 percent union density. The second group has shown relatively stable levels of union density over the whole period—sometimes rising and falling at periods, as for the United Kingdom—but generally remaining within a band of 30 to 60 percent density. This group consists of Australia, Austria, Canada, Germany, Ireland, New Zealand, Norway, and the United Kingdom. The last group has seen steadily plummeting density figures over the postwar period, and includes France, Japan, the Netherlands, Switzerland, and the United States.18
The high-density group consists of the same four countries retaining Ghent systems of unemployment benefits disbursal, as we have seen above. But another significant institutional factor is the level at which labor market institutions, such as bargaining, are centralized. There is a strong correlation between centralized bargaining and rates of union density growth—countries with bargaining taking place at the national or industry-wide level are more likely to grow or maintain a steady level of density than are those where firm-level (or even lower) bargaining is pervasive. Within the middle-range steady-density group, those with more decentralized bargaining, such as Canada, tend to maintain lower levels of density than those with highly centralized bargaining structures, like Austria (their densities sitting at around 30 and 60 percent, respectively).19

But the surprising finding with regard to this correlation is that centralized labor markets are actually a cause—perhaps the most important cause—of whether a country’s union density will grow, decline, or remain stable. There are a number of reasons why this may be the case:

1) “With labor market centralization, employers have few opportunities or incentives to oppose union organizing . . . Employers are forced to pay the costs of unionism regardless of whether their workers are union members. More generally, labor market centralization defuses employer opposition by establishing the institutional legitimacy of organized labor”;

2) “Powerful confederations in centralized labor markets coordinate the organizing effort and redistribute organizing costs from highly unionized industries to weakly unionized industries. Coordination also reduces competition among unions over membership”; and finally

3) “Centralized labor markets involve union confederations in developing and applying economic policy. A centralized influence over the size of the national wage bill provides unions with some control over unemployment and its distribution across industries. Where unions actively participate in other economic policy areas, they can protect organized industries and occupations by directing investment and subsequent employment to these or other unionizable sectors.”20

There is a subtle difference among these three explanations. The first is a result, specifically, of the centralization of bargaining. When wage and contract negotiations are carried out by employer and union representatives at the industry level, then employers in that industry will have little cause to resist unionization—because they will, ideally, be bound to the industry-wide negotiations regardless of whether their workers are unionized or not. The second explanation, though, focuses on the centralization of unions themselves, regardless of whether they bargain at the plant, industry, or national level. Centralized unions are able to a) effectively coordinate and implement industry-wide or even nation-wide strategies, b) prevent inter-union competition or jurisdictional disputes, and c) rationally distribute resources where they are most needed, because
unions in industries and occupations that are the most difficult to organize are not likely to be those with the greatest dues income from their membership. The third explanation springs from the incorporation of peak union organizations into the policy-making apparatuses of government.

But how do a country's labor market institutions become centralized? For many high-density countries, centralized bargaining has its roots in mass strike activity carried out in the course of sweeping social movements. National or industry bargaining frameworks were established as a way for employers to avert social uprising by formally recognizing union peak organizations (even if they represented only a fraction of workers), granting concessions on pay and working conditions, and establishing a long-term foundation on which workers' interests could be represented in the determination of macroeconomic conditions. In such cases centralized bargaining long preceded tripartite corporatism and were virtually never codified in law, but were rather enduring institutional arrangements based on some form of Social Pact between representatives of industry and labor. A second route to centralization has been through the reconciliation and reconstruction processes in occupied or defeated countries following WWII. After the war, representatives of industry and labor would shape industrial relations based on a Social Pact similar to that found in the earlier social movement concessionary agreements. This was the case, for example, in Germany, Austria, and Belgium.

Although these Social Pacts were established extremely early in some countries—for example the 1898 September Agreement in the Netherlands, the Swedish Basic Agreement of 1938, and the Finnish Basic Agreement of 1940—peak-level bargaining tended to be sporadic, and not until the postwar period was bargaining regularized, and the trajectories of most countries solidified in more or less decentralized bargaining arrangements.

Where neither social movements nor postwar reconciliation processes were able to demand organized recognition of unions' right to exist and organize the working population, bargaining tended to devolve to the level of the firm, except within oligopolistic industries where small numbers of employers who do not compete on prices facilitated central negotiations. Where such industry-specific centralization pertained, we find that union growth rapidly outpaced that of other industries. The postwar expansion of union density in the public sectors of otherwise low-density countries is usually explained in terms of the political vulnerability of public employers—governmental institutions are supposedly exposed to pressure from elected representatives. But public services are typically just monopolistic. That is, public employers usually do not become “uncompetitive” when they bear the costs of unionization. To say the same thing in other words, the public sector typically encompasses the most highly centralized industries in the economy, often with only one employer per market. As such, all the forces lending centralization to rapidly growing union density apply. Government services are also typically sheltered from any meaningful form of international competition, which makes them even better and more stable organizing environments than most private oligopolistic industries.
Radical Political Organizing

The international record generally does not prove grounds for an optimistic evaluation of the “inward” strategies of unions’ new strategic efforts, although all address real shortcomings of American labor. There is simply not a single example to be found of any labor movement thriving because of reinvesting in organizing, by deploying more effective grassroots organizing strategies, by democratizing its operations, lending its rank-and-file greater control over its actions, and certainly not by decentralizing its resources, nor are those countries with vanishing labor movements somehow peculiarly afflicted, among all countries, by the slings and arrows of economic (mis)fortune, suffering greater capital mobility, faster growing service sectors, more labor-saving technology, or particularly egregious examples of outsourcing, privatization, deregulation, and so on. Cases in which labor market centralization was a result of postwar reconciliation can offer little in the way of guidance, but the rest of what we could term “successful” labor movements forged their framework of union power in the flames of social movements. The Social Pacts that institutionalized unions’ legitimacy and, in fact, their right to grow and encompass any and all workers, were essentially class compromises springing from social democratic and socialist struggles that reached peaks of mass strike activity and widespread protest. Italy, the one country to reverse a trajectory of decline in the postwar period, did so in the context of late 1960s mass protest (the “Hot Autumn” of 1968), which—unlike in the United States and Britain, where this movement was essentially a youth movement—saw mass working class participation spearheaded by labor unions.

The sad fact is that organizing efforts, even if they were to increase in number and success to many times their present state, would make almost no difference. If between 1973 and 1998 unions had won none of their certification elections, union density in the United States would be only 1.7 percent lower than it is now. It would have required a successful organizing rate five times what it actually was for all twenty-five of those years to even achieve a stable, non-declining union density of 17.5 percent. Bronfenbrenner and Juravich have commented, on finding that grassroots tactics greatly improve unions’ success rate in certification elections, that “these data suggest that the recommitment of the labor movement to organizing is not a futile effort. If unions use the right tactics, they can still win, despite the odds.” But not only would unions in the United States have to win more of their elections, they would have to exponentially run more organizing campaigns over several decades to even approach a fraction of the membership that organized labor enjoyed at its peak. Massive vamping up of organizing efforts was not the means by which unions grew rapidly in the first place, in the U.S. or elsewhere. But by focusing on the means by which certain union election campaigns win and others fail, the organizing literature tends to get mired in a microeconomic perspective that is occasionally, but illegitimately, generalized to the macroeconomic level (i.e., that proliferating winning campaign tactics can reverse decline).
When confronted with the total lack of any tangible success in attempting to reverse membership decline, John Sweeney responds with the litany that unions are organizing “for the long-term,” and that results may not be immediate: “organizing is long-term—I keep saying this. If you can rebuild the culture of organizing and get unions working together, hopefully they’re going to be very strong there in five to six years.” This comment was offered at an interview in 1998, in which Sweeney was asked about the failure to meet a goal of increasing membership three percent by the previous year. The membership goals for 2000 also floundered.

We need to return to the question of what was abandoned by the New Voice. The strategic deemphasis of legal and institutional reform was accomplished by an act of bad faith. Attempts to reform labor law are uniformly equated with lobbying efforts. The editors of Organizing to Win, in despair of the “grim reality that substantive labor law reform, no matter how badly it was needed or how well it was justified, could not be achieved without first significantly expanding labor’s political power,” cite only the trail of labor’s failed lobbying efforts and its inability to twist “labor-friendly” politicians’ arms in the back alleys of D.C. Although Sweeney has declared his intention to make labor the “civil rights movement” of the 21st century, imagine if the actual civil rights movement of the 20th century had abandoned reform of the law as unattainable because of its lack of political power in Congress!

There is a tendency for New Voice spokespeople and researchers in the organizing literature to project a limited vision of “the political.” Specifically, it becomes limited to electoral activity and subsequent efforts to hold representatives “accountable” to their labor bases. This is not the sort of political action that allowed the civil rights movement to win important gains, and the alternative is not simply to organize for the long term and direct what little national and local congressional pull we have toward supporting the organizing environment. The alternative is radical political organizing: mobilizing in opposition to the very political and social institutions, as well as the laws supporting them, through organized resistance and noncompliance. These are the primary weapons at the disposal of social movements such as the civil rights movement.

The term “social movement unionism” has gained wide currency among union activists and scholars, but it is used primarily as a shorthand for unions that have adopted grassroots strategies and membership mobilization, or pursued coalitions with a broader range of social organizations. In other words, there actually need not be any movement to qualify as a “social movement union.” This has smoothed over the more pressing question of unions’ capacity to act collectively, and to generate growing resistance among working people to exploitative and marginalizing institutions or laws.

American labor’s decentralized structure plays a role here: when union activities—bargaining, organizing, strike decisions—are carried out independently at the local level, the ability to organize strategic action on a large scale is debilitating, and every local must individually face the costs of whatever actions they take on their own. The result is that any large-scale activities within the labor
movement face a collective action dilemma. This can be described more concretely in a few ways.

In the case of wildcat strikes, or any other illegal form of action, locals all face the costs of taking such actions individually—namely, litigation, fines, or possibly, decertification. If a significant number of unions were to strike simultaneously, or collectively engage in direct action or civil disobedience, the chances are much greater that none of the unions would pay any cost, or at least that all unions would face greatly reduced consequences. However, in a decentralized labor movement, it is difficult to build consensus for radical action from the ground up, because unions have to commit themselves to action before knowing that others will follow. Decentralized labor movements are less able to act collectively—just as are workers who have not yet formed a union, each individually facing the costs of standing up for their rights at work.

Another factor similarly related to unions’ capacity for collective action is the degree to which the enforcement of labor rights and working conditions are channeled into the legal system. In an example of a typical strike, Richard Hyman describes a wildcat walkout by workers at a Ford plant in Britain in 1971. The workers were demanding the reinstatement of a sacked shop steward. Upon Ford’s refusal to reinstate the steward, stewards at nineteen other Ford factories met and called upon the national union to endorse a national strike. Ford quickly reinstated the worker.\(\textsuperscript{27}\) In this case, unions policed their own bottom-line standards through the specter of spreading collective action. In the United States, however, unions have largely abdicated this policing function to “formal” dispute resolution and legal processes. At key points in the U.S. labor movement’s postwar history, from the PATCO strike to Hormel to UPS to Safeway, unions have lost precedent-setting struggles through their inability to impose rising costs through expanding collective action. Although in most of these cases striking unions have received spectacular support from the communities and other unions, the broader labor movement has not been able to effectively police its own labor standards, including unions’ very right to recognition.

The New Unity Partnership’s move toward structural reform of union organization addresses some of the issues that have been important for labor movements in comparative perspective.\(\textsuperscript{28}\) Most growing labor movements have undergone merger waves and, at some point, most have reorganized their organizational boundaries by industry.\(\textsuperscript{29}\) Union consolidation and reorganization does have the potential to reduce jurisdictional disputes and to increase the capacity of unions within an industry to coordinate bargaining and act collectively. However, the high-mark period of union growth for the American labor movement was ushered in by intense competition between fragmented national and peak labor organizations, so one cannot be too dogmatic about the benefits of eliminating jurisdictional conflict.\(\textsuperscript{30}\) Union solidarity does not flow automatically from organizational consolidation: union bureaucracies can and often do enforce legal and institutional restrictions on collective action, instead of contributing to overcoming them. In the case of the Ford strike mentioned above, the existence of a tight horizontal shop steward network was crucial for
facilitating solidarity action, and launched a support campaign that shaped the
intervention of the national union. In the U.S., a strictly vertical relationship
between lay leaders and the union bureaucracy usually pertains, through
steward-chief steward-officer structures. Unions will sometimes even sanction
the direct cooperation of stewards across locals and regions.31

Structural reform, sensible and important, needs to be used to facilitate sol-
idaristic action. Labor movements unable to police minimal rights of workers,
and in particular the right to organize, will simply not survive under hostile
political conditions and will face costs of victory simply too high to pay and
impossible to grow within, regardless of the innovativeness or militancy with
which unions might individually attempt to build strength.

The international experience also indicates that unions’ presence at the
margins of the labor market may be far more important than previously con-
sidered. Unions in the United States, as elsewhere, first became a social force
during the Great Depression of the 1930s. Although downsizing, job insecurity,
or irregular forms of work are often credited with facilitating the decline of
organized labor in recent decades, clearly unions have thrived under far worse,
far more insecure, and more bitter economic conditions. During the Depres-
sion years, “organizing the unemployed” was a significant means through which
unions functioned at the margins of the labor market—a position from which
labor leveraged political agitation on behalf of social security provisions.32

Focusing on the margins—the point of turnover, or unemployment—means
organizing whole labor markets (i.e., groups of potential employees), instead of
workplaces (groups of actual employees). Unions played no comparable role
during the unemployment of the early 1980s, and have to a significant extent
become dislodged from labor markets even in manufacturing where this posi-
tion was strongest.33 It is no accident that right-to-work provisions outlaw union
halls, for example. Some of the most successful organizing efforts today focus
on organizing local ethnic communities disproportionately employed in certain
occupations and industries. In such cases, community networks often form the
boundaries of a local labor market in the same way that skill sometimes does in
manufacturing or professional occupations.

The most important social movements of our time have centered around
illegal resistance; they are almost defined by their collective resistance to and
noncompliance with institutions of oppression.34 Labor movement is, without
question, illegal today in the United States and in most countries of the world.
However, labor in many other countries has been more successful at building
networks of solidarity and the foundations for collective action that allow
working people to police their own living and working standards in the face of
recalcitrant employers or governments. “Social movement unionism” is not a
set of tactics or structures; it is a historical event that either grows when it is
needed, or fails to. American labor needs to organize, but if it thinks that it can
rescue itself by persuading locals to increase their efforts to organize new
members, if it really believes that it is “organizing for the long run,” it will dis-
cover that, although in the long run we are not all dead (pace Keynes), unions
certainly will be. Labor needs to organize politically and radically—in short, it
needs to organize a social movement for social change. It needs to transform itself in the process.

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Notes

1. Meyerson 1998, p. 5. This count excludes only a one-year president in the middle of Samuel Gompers’s otherwise uninterrupted tenure at the AFL.
5. Farber and Western 2000, sections 3.4 and 4.2; Johnson 2000, Table 3, p. 27 for density figures.
15. Western 1997, pp. 50–53.
22. Farber and Western 2000, p. 28.
29. See Flanagan, Soskice, and Ulman 1983.
30. See Russell 2001 for the importance of competitive unionism during the growth of the Teamsters.
32. Lorence 1996 for unions and the unemployed movement in the U.S.; see Croucher 1987 for the British case.
34. Leaving aside conservative social movements, for the moment.
References


Lorence, J. L. *Organizing the unemployed: Community and union activists in the industrial heartland*. Albany: State University of New York Press.


