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# INTRODUCTION

Ruth Milkman and Kim Voss

Organized labor's obituary appears regularly in the news as well as in scholarly commentary, and even union supporters tend to be pessimistic about the prospects for reconstruction. Over the past three decades, emboldened employers have redoubled their opposition to collective bargaining, helped along by deindustrialization, deregulation, and other types of economic restructuring. As a result, union density has fallen precipitously, especially in the private sector, in which only 9 percent of the workforce is organized today-about one-third the level that prevailed in the early 1970s (Hirsch and Macpherson 2003). Moreover, in the industries and occupations in which employment is expanding most rapidly, unions are conspicuous mainly by their absence. Similarly, key population groups like immigrants and women, whose share of the workforce is growing, remain underrepresented in the ranks of organized labor-despite evidence that such workers, especially those concentrated in low-wage jobs, are especially sympathetic to unionization efforts (Milkman 2000; Bronfenbrenner 1997).

These developments helped spur John Sweeney's dramatic ascension to the presidency of the American Federation of Labor-Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO) in 1995, on a platform calling on unions to redirect resources toward "organizing the unorganized" on an unprecedented scale. Sweeney's election sparked widespread hopes that he would lead the Federation down the same road he had previously traveled as president of the

Service Employees International Union (SEIU): reversing the tide of de-unionization with imaginative strategies to rebuild union density in previously organized sectors where serious erosion had occurred, while at the same time establishing labor's presence in new and growing areas of the economy. The SEIU's iconic "Justice for Janitors" campaign of the early 1990s already had vividly demonstrated how new workers (in this case immigrants) in de-unionized building service jobs could be galvanized into action to restore union recognition and, against all odds, extract concessions from employers (Waldinger et al. 1998). And although they used more conventional strategies and tactics than in the janitors' drive, successful SEIU campaigns in nursing homes and other health care settings had also shown the potential for service sector unionization beyond the traditional strongholds of organized labor.

The SEIU's pioneering organizing initiatives, along with similar developments in the Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees (HERE) and a few other highly innovative unions, raised hopes in many quarters that the lethargic "business unionism" that dominated postwar America could be supplanted by what has come to be called "social movement unionism" -hopes that gained momentum during Sweeney's initial years as AFL-CIO president. Drawing heavily on the staff who had helped revitalize the SEIU (some insiders quipped that the AFL-CIO was becoming the "AFL-SEIU"), Sweeney swept aside most of the old guard that had long run the Federation by installing younger, college-educated cadre, including many seasoned veterans of progressive social movements. This new generation of union leaders has been deeply committed to the project of labor renewal and has been prepared to use unorthodox tactics toward that end.

The Sweeney era produced some important breakthroughs. Indeed, in the late 1990s union density finally slowed its downward plunge. Given the rapid growth of the workforce in the late 1990s and the steady erosion of union membership through layoffs, retirements, deaths, business relocations and so forth, just keeping density stable-as the labor movement came close to doing in the late 1990s-has not been an insignificant accomplishment. Going beyond this to actually increase density, however, has proven to be an elusive goal. New organizing has produced membership gains, but these have been modest, concentrated in a few occupations and industries, and limited geographically as well. Examples abound of imaginative, successful campaigns that demonstrate the potential for change-several are analyzed in this volume-but thus far no one has been able to replicate them on a large enough scale to significantly impact the overall density problem. Moreover, as Kate Bronfenbrenner and Robert Hickey show in the first chapter of this volume, only a few AFL-CIO affiliates have acted on Sweeney's exhortations to refocus union efforts on organizing. The initial excitement of 1995 has

given way to a more sober reckoning that is far less optimistic and in some quarters has led to deep demoralization.

Historically, union growth always has been uneven, with long troughs and occasional giant waves (Clawson 2003). The surges of growth have never been predictable—indeed, in the early 1930s, who could have imagined the rise of the CIG? It remains to be seen whether the embryonic organizing breakthroughs of the past decade will generate a new wave of mass union growth, or whether the labor movement will remain hopelessly mired in the welter of employer resistance, internal bureaucratic inertia, worldwide neoliberal hegemony, and an increasingly hostile domestic political environment. What are the prospects for a broader labor movement resurgence? What obstacles stand in the way of replicating the organizing gains that have been made over the past decade on a large enough scale to give unions real influence once again, of the sort they enjoyed in the 1940s? Those are among the questions posed by the chapters in this volume.

#### **A STALLED REVOLUTION?**

Many commentators have discussed the formidable external obstacles to union revitalization. For example, it is well documented that employers' anti-union strategies have become increasingly sophisticated in response to the new organizing approaches developed by the labor movement over the past decade, so that the barrier unions must overcome is continually being raised (Bronfenbrenner 2000; Bronfenbrenner and Hickey 2002). Transnational corporations have developed especially potent and sophisticated approaches to countering union organizing efforts in their U.S.-based facilities, as Bronfenbrenner and Hickey note in this volume.

The political environment also presents major problems. Even under the relatively sympathetic Clinton administration, which was the context in which Sweeney's program was first launched, labor law reform proved impossible. And since the 2000 election, the political climate at the national level has deteriorated dramatically, producing one of the most virulently anti-union administrations in many decades. The pervasiveness of neoliberal ideology, which undermines the legitimacy of *any* collective action project designed to affect the labor market, is another critical barrier that any union organizing effort must seek to overcome. Given these myriad external difficulties, at times it seems miraculous that any organizing successes are possible at all.

Yet the problems are not only external. Significant difficulties within the labor movement itself also have contributed to the present impasse. Most importantly, relatively few unions have seriously attempted to implement the Sweeney program. As Bronfenbrenner and Hickey's chapter in this volume

demonstrates in compelling detail, only a handful of the AFL-CIO's sixty-five affiliates are actually engaged in organizing on any significant scale. Equally important, this analysis shows that even the most active affiliates do not consistently launch the strategically focused, comprehensive campaigns using rank-and-file-intensive tactics that have proven most effective in the current political and economic environment.

Bronfenbrenner and Hickey show that only about six Internationals have vigorously pursued the new organizing agenda that Sweeney promoted with such fanfare. Besides SEIU and HERE, which stand out as leaders even within this small group of unions, they identify the Union of Needletrades, Industrial and Textile Employees (UNITE); the Communication Workers of America (CWA); the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Workers (AFSCME); and the United Auto Workers (UAW) as the key players in the 1990s, each of which has achieved some major organizing victories. But few other unions have followed suit: most are hardly attempting to recruit new members at all. And even among those that are actively organizing, many fail in their efforts, largely because they continue to use obsolete approaches that savvy employers can easily neutralize. The result is that for all but a handful of unions, membership continues to hemorrhage, while their limited (or nonexistent) organizing activity makes the overall challenge of increasing density seem insurmountable, generating a vicious circle of demoralization and decline.

Why is it that so few unions, despite Sweeney's tireless encouragement, have followed the lead of SEIU and the other unions that have shown the way forward? One answer is that effective organizing consumes huge resources—money, staff time, intellectual and legal talent, and so forth. To organize a few thousand workers can take years, cost millions of dollars, and exhaust the capacity of already-stretched union staffers. Can the modest benefits of any single campaign really justify such enormous costs? Will the incremental membership gains that result have any significant impact on the density problem, for an individual union, industry, or sector—or for the labor movement as a whole? Not only outside commentators but also many progressive unionists ponder these questions regularly as they seek to maximize the impact of scarce resources, and to balance the work of serving their existing membership against the challenge of recruiting new workers into the fold.

The cost-benefit dilemma is a serious one for union leaders. Yet, union organizing efforts can be highly effective when key clusters of tactics are used in combination, as Bronfenbrenner and Hickey argue persuasively in this volume—offering systematic empirical evidence in support of the union slogan, "Si, se puede!" (Yes, it can be done!) If all sixty-five affiliates of the AFL-CIO were as active and strategically sophisticated in organizing the unorganized as the SEIU, the resulting quantitative gains in union membership

might even translate into a qualitative leap forward. Moreover, if the alternative to expending major resources on new organizing is the slow (or perhaps not so slow) death of organized labor as a major social force, then investing all available resources in the project is simply imperative.

Yet, the daily reality on the ground is rather different—at least from the viewpoint of the individual labor leaders who are in a position to deploy or withhold resources for organizing. Most of these leaders are fully aware of the density crisis and of the fact that the very survival of organized labor is potentially at stake. But the decentralized structure of the American labor movement means that the lived experience of this crisis is highly fragmented. In some local unions—and it is at the local level that most organizing efforts are initiated—membership is stable, and the day-to-day work involves contract administration and other routine tasks. In such contexts, union officials may well be complacent about the larger crisis of the labor movement. Moreover, especially if they are elected (as opposed to appointed) leaders, they may be reluctant to bear the considerable risks involved in new organizing, even if adequate resources are available. From their perspective, while a major organizing success might have a large political payoff, a failure could be a career-breaker. In fact, even a success can be problematic if it overturns the political status quo of the local. In the absence of any attractive employment alternatives, most such officials, particularly the middle-aged (or older) functionaries who are at the helm of so many local unions, tend to be quite cautious in this regard. For them, avoiding the risks inherent in undertaking major organizing efforts is entirely rational, and this political calculus must figure prominently in any effort to explain why organizing activity is so limited.

Even when local leaders are prepared to take a chance on organizing, however, success is unlikely without extensive support from the International union (Voss and Sherman 2000). At the level of the International, union officials tend to be appointed rather than elected—and even when elected are unlikely to be deposed given the one-party-like systems that govern most Internationals. Even though in most cases they run little or no political risk by investing in organizing, International union leaders are nonetheless habitually cautious and wary. They tend to be even older than their local counterparts, and thus perhaps even less concerned about the long-term outlook for the movement as a whole. And for most of them, to impose change on reluctant local leaders is hardly the course of least resistance. Thus at the International level too, many union leaders are reluctant to invest the resources required for serious organizing initiatives. While they may echo the rhetoric of reform, few have taken the necessary practical steps toward implementing Sweeney's call to focus on rebuilding their base.

The AFL-CIO itself, while occasionally providing resources for its affiliates' individual organizing campaigns (in the shape of extra staff or funding), does

virtually no organizing on its own. The fact that the Federation is plagued by a plethora of internal divisions and inter-union rivalries does not help matters (Lerner 2003, 26). Indeed, over the years some unions have disaffiliated entirely from the AFL-CIO, most notably the Carpenters. The fragmented and decentralized structure of the Federation, and the mistrust many individual locals and Internationals harbor toward one another, also makes it difficult to build multi-union organizing efforts, which in the abstract would appear to offer a promising strategy for large-scale sectoral organizing. In the exceptional cases where such efforts have been launched, they have proven difficult to sustain because of the internal tensions within labor's ranks (for an example, see Delgado 2000).

"Raiding" is a related problem, which involves one union persuading already-organized workers who are members of another union to switch their affiliation. This boosts the membership of the raiding union (and may even be presented as an "organizing" victory), though it has no impact whatsoever on the overall density problem. And of course raiding involves unions expending valuable resources fighting one another rather than focusing on the challenges facing the movement as a whole. Certainly this does not contribute in any meaningful way to the formidable task of redirecting resources into organizing the unorganized on a large scale.

Yet another obstacle to transforming the labor movement is the gender and ethnic mismatch between union leadership and that of the vast unorganized sector of the workforce. Despite the Sweeney administration's efforts to increase diversity at the highest levels of labor's officialdom, the majority of union officials are still older, native-born white males, who often have difficulty appealing to the nation's increasingly female, foreign-born and relatively youthful workforce. There are more women and minorities at all levels of labor leadership today than in the past, but in most cases their representation remains limited to that of tokens. Insensitivity or simple obliviousness on the part of labor leaders to the issues that can move women, immigrants, and young workers is the inevitable result, despite several initiatives Sweeney has launched to reach out to these groups.

Not only must the composition of union leadership change in order for organizing the unorganized to assume center stage, but the organizational structure and culture of unions must be overhauled as well. This is especially true at the local level, where the longstanding organizational focus has been contract enforcement and member services. The vast majority of local union staff positions remain dedicated to these functions, as do the overwhelming majority of funds and other resources (Milkman and Rooks 2003). And local union culture has reflected these priorities as well, so that many members have learned to view their unions as quasi-insurance companies or lawyers-calling



on union representatives when problems arise at work, but otherwise not participating much in union affairs.

Ultimately, in order to recruit new members on a scale that would be required to significantly rebuild union power, unions must fundamentally alter their internal organizational practices to direct staff resources to organizing (Voss and Sherman 2000; Fletcher and Hurd 2001). This means shifting priorities away from servicing current members and toward unionizing new ones—creating more organizer positions on the staff; developing programs to teach current members how to handle the tasks involved in resolving shop-floor grievances, so that existing staff are freed up to work on external organizing; and building programs that train members to participate fully in the work of external organizing. Such a reorientation entails redefining the very meaning of union membership from a relatively passive stance toward one of continuous active engagement. For unions, as for any other type of organization, such a fundamental shift in orientation faces many obstacles—perhaps most importantly, confronting the formidable forces of bureaucratic inertia.

In the unions that *have* been successfully transformed, the process typically has been orchestrated from the top, contrary to the rather romantic view that only the rank and file can be the fount of democratic change (Voss and Sherman 2000). The prime example here is SEIU, and Stephen Lerner, one of the architects of the janitorial campaigns that have been so central to sparking the wave of union revitalization in the 1990s, unapologetically asserts that a key element of J for 1's success was the institutional decision not to tolerate local leaders who did not want to organize. Lerner argues that in order for the labor movement to rebuild, it needs union leaders who are fully committed to putting organizing first, who are willing to focus all the institutional resources they control on that task, and who are willing to create moral and physical crises in the workplace in order to overcome employer opposition. Mass organizing, he contends, justifies a ruthless approach to purging any union staffers who refuse to go along with the program. This can involve forcing union mergers to rationalize collective bargaining regimes and ongoing organizing efforts, using trusteeships to bring resistant locals into line, as well as other seemingly undemocratic tactics (Lerner 2001). While this approach has engendered a stream of criticism from some quarters, no one can deny that the SEIU has by far the best record of recruiting new members and of advancing the difficult but crucial process of organizational change.

Yetlasting transformation *does* require genuine rank-and-file participation, so that members come to sense their ownership of the organization, a dilemma that Teresa Sharpe's chapter in this volume excavates in detail. This is the key strength of the HERE approach to organizing, which involves an intensive phase of training rank-and-file union members in a wide variety of

leadership skills. These include: how to articulate the value and meaning of union building; how to persuade unorganized workers to commit themselves to that task, even at the risk of their (already precarious) livelihoods; and how to build confidence that union members themselves can successfully resolve problems in the workplace without relying on business agents or other experts. The process of worker empowerment is extremely labor-intensive, and HERE may be the only union to have fully developed the commitment and organizational capacity to implement such an approach across a range of different campaigns. Sharpe's chapter shows in rich detail just how complex this process is and exposes the tension between the inevitable reliance on the leadership and expertise of professional organizers, on the one side, and the urgency of transferring real decision-making power to the rank and file, on the other.

Yet another obstacle to new organizing is the unpleasant reality that in many contexts rank-and-file workers are not inherently pro-union, as the chapters by Steven Lopez and Robert Penney in this volume vividly demonstrate. Lopez's study of nursing home organizing in the "rust belt" exposes the very negative view of unions held by many workers who witnessed the devolution of industrial unions firsthand in the 1980s. That historical legacy is a major obstacle for the new unionism. Lopez shows that it can be surmounted, but that accomplishing this requires enormously nuanced strategic thinking and experienced leadership of just the sort that SEIU has developed. Penney, who also studied SEIU campaigns in the Midwest (although in hospitals rather than nursing homes), goes even further in emphasizing the conservatism of rank-and-file workers. He shows that in some circumstances hospital workers actively opposed unionism, which they viewed as a likely source of conflict and hostility in the workplace, and not necessarily as leading to any material gains. These workers, while skeptical about union organizers' claims, responded positively to employer promises of advancement through cooperation with management. Penney argues that the "No on Union" committees that many commentators dismiss as transparent vehicles of management manipulation are genuinely appealing to many workers, who actively embrace them and independently take on leadership roles in opposing union campaigns. If some ambiguity remains as to the relative importance of workers' own contributions to anti-union committees as compared to management's direct or *sub rosa* support for them, there is no doubt that they are a force to be reckoned with in many organizing campaigns.

This makes the role of professional organizers all the more central to rebuilding the labor movement, whether unions adopt an approach like that of the SEIU or that of HERE. Recruiting and training energetic and savvy organizers is critical—as is retaining them. As Daisy Rooks' chapter in this volume illustrates, the occupational culture of union organizing is extremely

intense, and the high level of dedication it demands is often difficult to sustain, especially in the absence of day-to-day emotional support and a serious institutional commitment to organizers as the key agents of labor movement survival and growth.

Through initiatives like the AFL-CIO's Organizing Institute (OI) and programs like Union Summer, many talented young activists have been drawn into the labor movement in recent years. Indeed, for this generation labor organizing appears to be one of the few viable arenas in which to fight for social justice. But, as Rooks shows in rich detail, holding onto these young activists has proven difficult in the face of the grueling "cowboy culture" of 24/7 campaigning—easily justified by intransigent employer anti-unionism—and the uneven commitment to change within the labor movement itself. Thus unions may thoughtlessly squander precious human resources in the desperate battle for immediate survival, while the process of long-term leadership development recedes onto the distant horizon. This is among the many reasons that the recent organizing successes of the new labor movement have yet to be replicated on any significant scale.

#### BUILDING THE NEW LABOR MOVEMENT

If we put the question of scale to one side, there are many hopeful examples on the local level that show the potential for labor movement expansion. HERE and SEIU provide the leading models, as we have already noted. Those two unions and others have shown how effective creative and well-crafted organizing strategies can be. And these unions have also built impressive alliances in recent years, bridging divisions within the labor movement, as well as in the wider social and political community. In addition to coalitions with student activists, labor has built ties to immigrant rights groups, environmental advocates, the anti-globalization movement, and even the peace movement—breaking from the historic social isolation that for many decades had limited labor's vision and power (Clawson 2003).

When labor pursues social movement unionism, activists in these allied movements respond positively, attracted to its far-reaching vision of social justice and impressed by its institutional resource base and longstanding political influence. This dynamic recalls the historic influence of the United Farm Workers (UFW) on a whole generation of social movement activists. Many of those who initially got involved were attracted to the UFW because they saw it as part of a larger movement for social justice rather than simply as a labor union. They soon discovered, however, that unions themselves could be a vehicle of social change, as the chapter in this volume by Marshall Ganz, Kim Voss, Teresa Sharpe, Carl Somers, and George Strauss explains. More recently,

immigrant union organizing campaigns have drawn in human rights and immigrant rights activists who have come to appreciate labor's potential contribution to a larger progressive agenda.

Many of the architects of new labor, then, have experience in other social movements, and this is indeed the source of many of the innovations that are guiding labor's transformation (Voss and Sherman 2000). Activists from the 1960s and 1970s generation, who cut their teeth in the New Left, the anti-Vietnam War movement, civil rights, and the women's movement, are now top leaders in many of the most innovative unions, as well as in the AFL-CIO. They have, in turn, worked to recruit a new generation of activists and to persuade them that labor is a viable arena for social justice efforts. The tactical repertoire of the earlier generation is palpable in AFL-CIO initiatives like Union Summer and the O1. As Leslie Bunnage and Judith Stepan-Norris recount in their chapter in this volume, Union Summer was explicitly designed to replicate the success of Freedom Summer—and it was most successful when student recruits were partnered with especially innovative and forward-looking union campaigns. The O1, similarly, seeks to teach young activists the techniques of nonviolent civil disobedience and other tactics honed in the social movements of earlier eras. The union-led 2003 Immigrant Workers' Freedom Ride is another deliberate echo of the 1960s.

Electoral politics, where unions retain far more influence than the density figures would suggest, has become another important arena for the new labor movement. California, and especially Los Angeles, has emerged as a site where labor has created a virtuous circle, whereby organizing success translates into political clout and vice versa (Meyerson 2001). On the municipal level too, as Preston Rudy's chapter in this volume shows, the SEIU has experimented with coalition-building, albeit with various degrees of success, increasingly recognizing the importance of the political arena in its efforts to recruit unorganized workers. In San Jose, Rudy shows, the janitors' campaign succeeded in part because it was able to tap into the political visibility and public legitimacy of a preexisting anti-growth coalition; however, the failure of a parallel effort in Sacramento suggests that alternative political strategies are necessary in certain contexts. In Sacramento, where a pro-growth coalition held power, SEIU activists experienced many setbacks before they found a way to define janitors' poverty as an issue of public concern, rather than as simply a private matter between workers and their employers. That SEIU activists were eventually successful in this effort suggests that labor is becoming much more savvy and effective in the political arena at both the municipal and state levels.

The same kind of careful strategic thinking is imperative for success in individual organizing campaigns at the workplace level. Not only, as Bronfenbrenner and Hickey's chapter shows, can comprehensive campaigns that draw on the full range of tactics in labor's arsenal be successful, even when

faced with determined employer resistance, but in addition, and contrary to popular belief, there is no economic downside here. For as DiNardo and Lee's (this volume) analysis of more than 27,000 union certification elections between 1983 and 2000 reveals, successfully unionized establishments are no less likely to survive in the marketplace than their non-union counterparts. All this offers a basis for optimism: if the labor movement could effectively combine the successful strategies that Bronfenbrenner and Hickey highlight at the workplace level with those Rudy and others document in the political arena, and replicate both on a large scale, labor could emerge as a formidable social force once again.

#### **OUTLINE OF THE VOLUME**

We begin with Bronfenbrenner and Hickey's broad overview of the current state of union organizing in the United States. This analysis scrutinizes the organizing records of International unions in the late 1990s in extensive detail, emphasizing that the "New Labor" phenomenon is in actuality limited to a few key unions. The chapter provides both a sobering assessment of the accomplishments of this segment of the labor movement and a blueprint of the tactical repertoire that the innovative unions have successfully deployed to overcome employer opposition to new organizing.

The next three chapters look at the organizing process from a different vantage point, using qualitative data to evaluate campaigns launched by HERE and SEIU over the past several years. Sharpe's ethnographic study of a hotel organizing campaign exposes the complex process by which professional organizers create space for rank-and-file workers to become leaders, while still using their own expertise to guide the campaign strategy. She offers a very nuanced view of union democracy, going well beyond the standard focus on leadership turnover and the structure of union governance. This case study reveals the tension between building a participatory model of unionism and capitalizing on the accumulated knowledge of experienced organizers. That the hotel campaign deliberately avoided the traditional NLRB electoral road to unionization makes Sharpe's research of even greater interest, since there are so few studies of alternative organizing approaches.

Even less frequently examined is the reality of rank-and-file anti-unionism that is the focus of the next two chapters. Penney's study of workers who actively oppose union organizing campaigns is a pioneering analysis of a topic that few labor scholars are prepared to confront. It shows that unions are anathema to many workers—to the point that some will actively invest time and effort in assiduous resistance to union appeals. Penney takes the anti-union stance of these workers seriously, arguing that members of "Vote No"

committees like the ones he interviewed are genuinely committed to the anti-union cause, even if they are being manipulated by management. Unpleasant as it may be, organizers need to understand this increasingly common phenomenon if they are to function effectively.

In other cases, workers may not actively organize against unions but they may nevertheless vote "no" in union elections. Steven Lopez documents an example of this in a context in which employer opposition was relatively mild. He compares two successive efforts to organize the same group of nursing home workers, one that failed and one that succeeded, confronting the reasons why even highly aggrieved workers often view unions as "do-nothing" organizations, as corrupt, or even as the cause of economic decline. Lopez shows that using the tactics Bronfenbrenner and Hickey recommend can indeed be effective, but argues that organizers must go even further by directly confronting workers' negative lived experience of unionism and by demonstrating with their actions that the new social movement unionism is distinctly different.

Recent literature on organizing tends to focus on the content of the campaigns themselves, paying less attention to the broader context in which they are embedded. However, Rudy's chapter highlights the role of the political environment and of the external forces that shape union campaigns. His comparative analysis of two SEIU janitorial organizing drives in northern California reveals the importance of framing labor struggles in broad terms that reach beyond the parochial, narrow definition of labor as a "special interest." Rudy shows that achieving this is far more difficult in some settings than others, depending on both the history of the local labor movement and on the skill of anti-union forces in defining labor as a narrow, special interest group. In one of his case studies, for example, Democratic politicians who might otherwise have supported labor were reliant on the targeted employers for financial and electoral support. Rudy also demonstrates the ways in which successful organizing campaigns can reshape the political context itself.

Taken together, these case studies expose many of the dilemmas confronting the leaders of the new labor movement. Not only must they face the challenges of building a more participatory democratic union culture, which traditionalists within the union officialdom themselves often resist, but they also are up against deeply entrenched anti-union sentiment from employers and the political establishment, as well as among workers themselves. How do unions recruit leaders who are prepared to confront these formidable obstacles? That is the subject of the next three chapters.

In the first, Ganz and his collaborators look at the generation of activists who entered organized labor in the 1970s and early 1980s, many of them veterans of the 1960s wave of protest movements. The data are drawn from a unique longitudinal study of California labor leaders who were first inter-

viewed in 1984 and re-interviewed 18 years later. Today, several of them hold prominent positions in both state and national unions. This study not only highlights the reasons that this generation of leaders chose the labor movement as the arena for their work—well before the reforms of the 1990s—but also reveals the role some of them played in that transformation process. In addition, it examines in detail the ways in which individuals adapt to and help perpetuate established organizational cultures, as well as the reasons why some deliberately work to change those cultures.

The two chapters that follow shift the focus to a younger generation of labor organizers. Unlike the older leaders, the newer cohort was actively recruited into the labor movement through special outreach programs designed to attract student activists—part of New Labor's effort to break out of its social isolation and to make labor a social movement once again. Rooks' study of organizer retention focuses on the Organizing Institute, perhaps the most high-profile of these efforts. She shows that many factors conspire to erode the enthusiasm and commitment to social justice with which young recruits begin their labor work, highlighting the gap between the political ideals that motivate them and the reality on the ground in many of the local unions in which they are placed. Rooks documents the very high turnover typical of these young organizers and shows that one of the few effective means of reducing it is the presence of supportive peers—something that has received surprisingly limited attention, even from the leaders most dedicated to labor's new agenda.

Bunnage and Stepan-Norris examine another Sweeney-era program oriented to recruiting young activists: Union Summer. They trace the origins of the program and its implementation in 1996 and then turn to explore the experiences of the first group of student recruits. Whereas the Organizing Institute was designed to attract young people into labor movement careers, Union Summer had a somewhat different purpose: to engage students on a short-term basis in labor's struggles and to build bridges to other progressive movements on college campuses and in the wider community. Bunnage and Stepan-Norris attempt to sort out the circumstances under which students were successfully integrated into unions' organizing campaigns, as well as the factors that led some students to make a longer-term commitment to labor. Their chapter also includes an epilogue on how Union Summer has changed since it was first launched in 1996.

The volume concludes with a chapter that examines the effects of union organizing on the economic viability of the firms involved. Contrary to the view often repeated by employers (and at times echoed by workers themselves, as Lopez's chapter notes), Lee and DiNardo's rigorous quantitative analysis finds that union victory in an NLRB representation election has no effect on establishment survival. This important finding is powerful ammunition for

the ongoing political debates about labor's future in the context of intensifying economic competition. Of course, even if unions did have negative economic effects, one might argue that their other social benefits are worth the cost, but this chapter suggests that this presumed tradeoff is nonexistent.

### **TOWARD A RESEARCH AGENDA FOR NEW LABOR**

During the 1930s, which was the last time there was a giant wave of union growth in the United States, intellectuals and labor activists actively collaborated to address the dilemmas faced by U.S. workers, jointly challenging corporate domination, social injustice, and economic insecurity (Lichtenstein 2002). Many of the contributions in this volume suggest the potential fruitfulness of reviving this tradition of labor-academic cooperation, while once again labor struggles to renew its power. Thus research like that of DiNardo and Lee can be used by labor activists to counter the claim that unions serve only to undermine business survival. Studies like Bronfenbrenner and Hickey's can be used by union reformers to influence labor leaders who resist change. Findings like those of Rooks; Bunnage and Stepan-Norris; and Ganz and his co-authors can be a resource for both local unions and the AFL-CIO to design more effective programs to attract and integrate activists from other social movements into organized labor. And organizers can use research like Lopez's and Penney's to design campaigns that better address the concerns of anti-union workers.

However, the academic-labor relationship is a two-way street: active engagement with the new labor movement can deeply enrich scholarly research too, as the studies collected in this volume illustrate. It is no accident that many of our contributors were themselves former organizers: Ganz spent many years as the UFW's Organizing Director; both Rooks and Sharpe are former OI staffers; Bunnage was on the staff of Union Summer; Penney is a former SEIU organizer; and Rudy, Bronfenbrenner and Hickey all have labor organizing experience as well. In addition, Sharpe and Lopez volunteered or interned in the campaigns they studied. More generally, the recent revitalization of labor has sparked a new wave of research on organizing, after many years of neglect of the topic. This new scholarship is not only being undertaken by former organizers but also draws in researchers from a variety of disciplinary backgrounds and theoretical persuasions. A new generation of labor scholars has emerged, whose growing body of work is not only important in its own right, but may eventually contribute valuable new insights to our understanding of organizational change and to the advancement of democratic practices, not only in institutional settings but in the wider civil society as well.



Important as the contributions collected here are, they also neglect some important questions. Perhaps the most urgent of these is to explore more fully what happens *after* organizing drives succeed. How often do unions get contracts after winning recognition, and under what conditions? What are the costs of employers' anti-union campaigns and the polarization they cause within the workforce? DiNardo and Lee pose some of these questions, but their research thus far does not offer any definitive conclusions.

Another aspect of the aftermath of organizing campaigns also deserves more attention, namely, how to sustain participatory social movement practices after union recognition has been achieved? Sharpe's chapter suggests the importance of such practices, but the question of how to maintain them over the long haul is a pressing one that has barely been studied (one exception is Markowitz 2000). A related issue concerns the incorporation of immigrants and other underrepresented groups into union leadership positions. Even the legendary Justice for Janitors campaigns often have precipitated leadership struggles between newly organized immigrant workers and old-guard (native-born) union leaders. More broadly, unions have been much better at incorporating immigrants, women, and racial and ethnic minorities into membership than into leadership positions. This problem is salient even at the local union level, and far worse in the upper reaches of labor's officialdom.

Finally, successful organizing campaigns may have implications for broader efforts to democratize society. We know from the work of Robert Putnam (2000) and Theda Skopol (2003) that civic participation has declined sharply in the United States, and that there are precious few "schools for democracy" in America today. Can the empowerment generated by social movement unionism spill over into other aspects of social life? Will workers who learn to resolve their own problems at work also be more likely to intervene productively in the schools their children attend and in the communities where their families live? If so, social movement unionism can help rebuild not only organized labor itself but also democratic practices more broadly. In that case, not only those of us concerned about labor's revitalization for its own sake, but also anyone interested in fostering progressive social and political change, can profit from the insights of the new wave of research on organizing that is represented in the following pages.

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## CHANGING TO ORGANIZE

### A NATIONAL ASSESSMENT OF UNION STRATEGIES

**Kate Bronfenbrenner and Robert Hickey**

In 1995 "changing to organize" became the mantra of a newly invigorated labor movement. There was talk of building a national organizing fund, recruiting thousands of new young organizers, and organizing millions of workers in new occupations and industries. In the years that followed, the AFL-CIO and its affiliates engaged in an aggressive effort to increase their organizing capacity and success. Staff and financial resources were shifted into organizing; leaders, members, and central labor bodies were mobilized to support organizing campaigns; and hundreds of new organizers were recruited from college campuses and the rank and file.

By 1999, it appeared that these efforts and initiatives were paying off when the media reported a net gain of 265,000 in union membership—the first such gain in more than twenty years (AFL-CIO 2000). But this would not last. Even leaving aside the tragic and unusual events of September 11, 2001, it is clear that despite all the new initiatives and resources being devoted to organizing and all the talk of "changing to organize," American unions have been standing still at best. The major victories have been highly concentrated in a few unions (SEIU, HERE, UNITE, CWA, AFSCME, and UAW) and industries (healthcare, building services, hotels, airlines, telecommunications, and higher education), while the majority of unions continue to experience organizing losses and declining membership (BNA PLUS 2001).

In this chapter we seek to answer the following questions: Why has *it* been so difficult for *unions* to turn the organizing efforts and initiatives of the last six years into any significant gains *in union* density? Why have a small number of unions been able to make major gains through organizing? And most importantly, which organizing strategies will be most effective in reversing the tide of the labor movement's organizing decline?

What our findings will show *is* that while the political, legal, and *economic* climate for organizing continues to deteriorate, and private sector employers continue to mount aggressive opposition to organizing efforts, some *unions* are winning. Our findings also show that the *unions* that are most successful at organizing run fundamentally different campaigns, in both quality and intensity, than those that are less successful, and that those differences hold true across a wide range of organizing environments, company characteristics, bargaining unit demographics, and employer campaign variables.

#### PREVIOUS ORGANIZING RESEARCH

Industrial relations research has provided important insights regarding the influence of environmental factors, company characteristics, and employer behavior on the outcome of NLRB certification elections (Farber and Western 2001; Kochan, Katz and McKersie 1994; Freeman and Kleiner 1988; Maranto and Fiorito 1987; Rose and Chaison 1990). This research has also deepened our understanding of the factors shaping attitudes toward unions and the individual union voter decision making process Oarley and Fiorito 1991; Freeman and Rogers 1999; Weikle, Wheeler and McClendon 1998). Another stream of research has focused on the impact that institutional characteristics of unions have on organizing success (Fiorito, Jarley and Delaney 1995; Hurd and Bunge 2002). Yet, with the exception of a handful of studies, most quantitative organizing research has failed to capture the critical role played by union strategies in organizing campaigns (Bronfenbrenner 1997a; Bronfenbrenner and Juravich 1998; and Peterson, Lee, and Finnegan 1992).

A small but growing body of qualitative case study research does explore the role of union strategies *in* the organizing process, exposing the interactions between environmental factors, employer behavior, and *union* strategies (Hoerr 1997; Waldinger and Erickson et al. 1998; Sciacchitano 1998; Juravich and Hilgert 1999; Delp and Quan 2002). By capturing the dynamic role of union strategies, this research also provides much needed insight into how the organizing process actually develops. However, this literature suffers from the limitations of case study designs that can capture only a small number of organizing campaigns, representing the most dramatic or interesting cases

(and almost all victories), and as such, are often unrepresentative of union organizing behavior.

Bronfenbrenner's survey of 261 private-sector NLRB certification elections in 1986 and 1987 was the first detailed study of the role of union tactics in organizing and first contract campaigns (Bronfenbrenner 1993; 1997a). The study showed that unions were more likely to win NLRB elections if they used rank-and-file intensive tactics such as person-to-person contact, active representative committees, member volunteer organizers, solidarity days, and building for the first contract before the election. This research also found that union tactics as a group had a more significant impact on election outcomes than other groups of variables that have been the traditional focus of industrial relations research, such as election environment, bargaining unit demographics, and employer characteristics (1993; 1997a). This was an important finding, because some researchers (such as William Dickens 1983) had argued that union tactics were entirely reactive-determined solely by management tactics. Subsequent quantitative studies of both private-sector NLRB elections and public-sector organizing campaigns have reinforced Bronfenbrenner's earlier research (Bronfenbrenner 1997c, 2000, and 2002; Bronfenbrenner and Juravich 1998; Juravich and Bronfenbrenner 1998).

However, in the more than ten years since this research was initiated, a great deal has changed in the economy, employer behavior, and the labor movement itself. Workers in almost every industry face more sophisticated employer opposition to organizing that is coupled with dramatic increases in corporate restructuring, foreign trade and investment, and shifts in work and production to other companies and other countries (Bronfenbrenner 2000, 2001). As Bronfenbrenner and Juravich found in their study of 1994 NLRB campaigns, traditional organizing approaches and the isolated use of innovative tactics have decreased in effectiveness (1998). Although some individual tactics, such as representative committees, workplace job actions, and media campaigns have a statistically significant positive impact on election outcomes, other tactics, such as house-calling the majority of the unit, holding solidarity days, staging rallies, or running a community campaign, did not have a significant impact. Yet, when these variables were combined into a single union tactics variable, adding one unit for each additional tactic, the probability of the union winning the election increased by as much as 9 percent for each additional tactic used. This suggests that the effectiveness of union tactics is strategically significant when unions combine tactics in a more comprehensive campaign.

In the years following the 1994 study, research by Bronfenbrenner and others has continued to show that comprehensive union tactics still hold the key to successful organizing efforts. Unions that use a broad range of union tactics as part of a multifaceted comprehensive strategy display greater organ-

izing success across all industries, bargaining unit demographics, and employer characteristics and behaviors (Bronfenbrenner 1997c, 2002; Sherman and Voss 2000).

Sherman and Voss (2000), in their study of local union organizing in Northern California, argue that the implementation of innovative tactics, such as rank-and-file intensive organizing and strategic targeting, requires far-reaching organizational transformation. Without such organizational transformation, unions may use some innovative tactics, but are unlikely to integrate a comprehensive union-building strategy. Indeed, Sherman and Voss found that the locals using a comprehensive union-building strategy are also the most innovative organizationally. This challenge to transform organizationally in order to fully implement innovative tactics suggests one reason why the dispersion of comprehensive union-building strategies has been so limited.

## RESEARCH METHODS

The data analyzed in this chapter were collected as part of a larger study commissioned in May 2000 by the United States Trade Deficit Review Commission to update Bronfenbrenner's previous research on the impact of capital mobility on union organizing and first contract campaigns in the U.S. private sector (Bronfenbrenner 1997b, 2000). Using surveys, personal interviews, documentary evidence, and electronic databases, we compiled detailed data on election background, organizing environment, bargaining unit demographics, company characteristics and tactics, labor board charges and determinations, union characteristics and tactics, and election and first contract outcomes for 412 NLRB certification election campaigns held in 1998 and 1999.

Our original random sample of 600 elections was derived from data compiled by the Bureau of National Affairs (BNA) of all NLRB single-union certification election campaigns in units with fifty or more eligible voters that took place in 1998-1999 (BNA PLUS 2000).<sup>1</sup> For each case in the sample we conducted in-depth surveys of the lead organizer for the campaign by mail and phone. We also searched computerized corporate, media, legal, and union databases, and reviewed Security and Exchange Commission filings, IRS 990 forms, and NLRB documents to collect data on company ownership, structure, operations, employment, financial condition, unionization, and employer characteristics and practices.

We were able to complete surveys for 412 of the 600 cases in the sample, for a response rate of 69 percent. Further, we were able to collect corporate ownership, structure, and financial information for 99 percent of the 412 cases. NLRB data were compiled from the FAST database for 65 percent of the

136 cases where NLRB charges were filed, while NLRB documents were collected for 46 percent. Summary statistics for the sample reveal that it is representative of the population of all NLRB certification elections in units over fifty that took place in 1998-1999 in terms of both industry and outcomes (BNA Plus 2000).

Descriptive statistics were calculated for a wide range of variables in order to capture the nature and extent of union and employer organizing activity and the broader context in which they operate. In addition, binary logistic regression was used to determine whether the number of comprehensive union-building strategies has a statistically significant impact on certification election outcome when controlling for the influence of election background, company characteristics, bargaining unit demographics, and employer opposition.

#### **THEORETICAL MODEL AND HYPOTHESES**

This research builds on the theoretical model developed by Bronfenbrenner (1993), and Bronfenbrenner and Juravich (1997) in previous organizing studies. According to this model, environmental factors plus union and employer characteristics and strategies combine to affect the election outcome both indirectly as they moderate the effect of other factors and directly as they influence worker propensity to vote for the union.<sup>2</sup> Under this model, union organizing tactics are an extremely important element of the organizing process. They play just as much-if not even a greater-role in determining election outcome than environmental factors and company characteristics and tactics.

This study tests two hypotheses. The first is that union success in certification elections depends on a comprehensive union-building strategy that incorporates the following ten elements, each of which is a cluster of key union tactics, that we argue are critical to union organizing success in the current environment: (1) adequate and appropriate staff and financial resources, (2) strategic targeting, (3) active and representative rank-and-file organizing committees, (4) active participation of member volunteer organizers, (5) person-to-person contact inside and outside the workplace, (6) benchmarks and assessments to monitor union support and set thresholds for moving ahead with the campaign, (7) issues which resonate in the workplace and in the community, (8) creative, escalating internal pressure tactics involving members in the workplace, (9) creative, escalating external pressure tactics involving members outside the workplace, locally, nationally, and/or internationally, (10) building for the first contract during the organizing campaign.<sup>3</sup>

This model expands upon Bronfenbrenner and Juravich's 1998 study by arguing that in the current organizing environment it is not enough to use as many union tactics as possible; rather, certain strategic elements, each comprised of clusters of key tactics, are essential ingredients for union organizing success. These strategic elements, which we will call comprehensive organizing tactics, may each be associated with higher win rates and/or have statistically significant positive effects on election outcomes. However, given the hostile climate in which unions must operate, we hypothesize that the use of these individual comprehensive organizing tactics will not be enough. Instead, union gains will depend on a multifaceted campaign utilizing as many of the ten comprehensive organizing tactics as possible. We hypothesize that the likelihood a union will win an election significantly increases for each additional comprehensive organizing tactic used by the union.

Our second hypothesis is that differences in the quality and intensity of the campaigns between unions are a better predictor of differences in election outcomes for those unions than employer opposition, bargaining unit demographics, or company or industry characteristics. We do not suggest that industry, corporate structure, unit type, worker demographics, or employer opposition do not matter. As our previous research has shown, all of these factors have a very powerful and significant impact on union win rates (Bronfenbrenner 1997a, 1997c, 2001; Bronfenbrenner and Juravich 1998). Indeed, it is more difficult to organize mobile industries, such as metal production and fabrication, garment and textile, food processing, and call centers, in the current global trade and investment climate. It is also more difficult to organize subsidiaries of large multinational corporations that have the resources to launch a full-scale counterattack against the union campaign. Furthermore, higher paid, primarily white male, blue collar, white collar, and professional and technical occupations are more difficult to organize in the current climate, because they tend to be more invested in the internal labor markets and more affected by threats of job loss or blacklisting that are typical in employer campaigns today (Bronfenbrenner 1997a; 2001). Although industry, unit type, worker demographics, and employer characteristics and tactics matter, union tactics matter more, because unions have so far to go before they live up to their full potential. While the majority of unions today run very weak campaigns with no underlying strategy, the majority of employers run very strategic campaigns, taking full advantage of the range of effective anti-union tactics available to them, and adapting and tailoring those tactics, depending on the organizing environment and the union's campaign.

If all unions were running aggressive comprehensive campaigns, and win rates continued to vary across the organizing environments in which individual unions operate, then these differences in organizing environment would play the primary role in explaining the variance in organizing success



between unions. Instead, we hypothesize that the more successful unions owe their organizing victories to the nature, quality, intensity, and comprehensiveness of their campaigns, across a diversity of industries, companies, bargaining units, and employer campaigns. Similarly, unions with lower win rates lose more elections because of the lack of intensity, quality, and comprehensiveness of the campaigns they run, rather than the organizing environment in which they operate.

We first test the hypotheses by comparing means, frequencies, and win rates for each of the comprehensive organizing tactics that make up our model, both individually and as part of the additive comprehensive organizing tactics variable. This will allow us to see whether, in accordance with our first hypothesis, win rates improve as the number of comprehensive organizing tactics increases. We will also test different combinations of comprehensive organizing tactics in order to ensure that all of the elements of our model contribute to union organizing success when added together with the other elements of the model. Next, we will compare means, frequencies, and win rates for company characteristics, bargaining unit demographics, and employer behavior in campaigns where unions used a comprehensive union-building strategy, including more than five of the comprehensive organizing tactics listed above, as compared to campaigns where unions used five or fewer comprehensive organizing tactics.<sup>4</sup> This will allow us to see both the nature of the environment in which unions are organizing today and whether, in accordance with our second hypothesis, union win rates increase across different industry, company, unit, and employer characteristics when the union runs more comprehensive campaigns.

We then will use binary logistic regression to test the hypothesis that the odds of winning the election will significantly increase for each additional comprehensive organizing tactic used, when we control for election background, employer characteristics, bargaining unit demographics, and employer tactics. We will also standardize the logistic regression coefficient in order to further test the relative effects of each of the statistically significant variables. We will use two models. Model A will include each of the individual elements of the comprehensive strategy, while model B will substitute a number of union tactics adding one point for each additional comprehensive tactic used. As described in appendix 1.2, the following control variables (with their predicted impact) will be included in both models: number of eligible voters (+/\_);<sup>5</sup> manufacturing sector (-); subsidiary of a larger parent company (-); ownership change before the election (+);<sup>6</sup> good to excellent financial condition (+);<sup>7</sup> board determined unit (-); other organized units (+); professional, technical, or white collar unit (-); unit at least 60 percent women (+); unit at least 60 percent workers of color (+);<sup>8</sup> and number of employer tactics used (-).

We will further test the second hypothesis by examining frequencies, means, and win rates across unions. This will allow us to evaluate the relative intensity and quality of union campaigns for each union and assess which unions are most likely to use each of the comprehensive organizing tactics in our model. It will also allow us to compare win rates across unions, depending on the number of comprehensive organizing tactics used, to see whether differences in union win rates are associated with the number of comprehensive organizing tactics they use.

### **ELEMENTS OF THE COMPREHENSIVE UNION-BUILDING STRATEGY**

According to our hypotheses, each of the ten tactical clusters, or comprehensive organizing tactics in our model enhances the union's organizing power in a unique way. Unions that allocate adequate and appropriate staff and financial resources,<sup>9</sup> for example, make an institutional commitment to be more intensely engaged in the campaign, recruit staff who are demographically representative of the workers they organize, and run more campaigns. Unions that engage in strategic targeting have approached organizing as a means to build bargaining power within certain sectors and industries, in contrast to the non-strategic "hot shop" organizing approach. Perhaps the single most important component of a comprehensive campaign is an active representative committee that gives bargaining unit members ownership of the campaign and allows the workers to start acting like a union inside the workplace, building trust and confidence among the workforce and counteracting the most negative aspects of the employer campaign.

The use of member volunteers to assist in organizing campaigns reflects a combination of greater institutional integration of current and potential new members and an emphasis on a worker-to-worker approach to organizing. Person-to-person contacts made inside and outside the workplace enhance the union's organizing power by providing the intensive one-on-one contacts necessary to build and sustain worker commitment to unionization both at home and in the increasingly hostile election environment at work. The combination of benchmarks and assessments allows unions to evaluate worker support for the union at different stages of the campaign in order to better adjust their strategy to the unit they are trying to organize and to set thresholds to determine when, and whether, they are ready to move on to the next stage of the campaign.

A focus on issues that resonate with the workers and the community, such as respect, dignity, fairness, service quality, and union power and voice, is essential both to build worker commitment to withstand the employer campaign and to gain community support. Internal pressure tactics allow the

union to start acting like a union before the election takes place, building solidarity and commitment among the workers being organized and restraining employer opposition. External pressure tactics, which exert leverage on the employer both in the local community and in their national or international operations, are essential to organizing in the increasingly global corporate environment. Finally, building for the first contract before the election helps build confidence in the workers being organized, showing them what the union is all about and signaling to the employer that the union is there for the long haul.

### **RESULTS: DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS**

Table 1.1 provides summary statistics on the election background and outcome for the 412 elections in our sample. In an improvement over past years, these data suggest that today's unions are beginning to target and win in slightly larger units. With an election win rate of 44 percent, first contract rate of 66 percent, and average unit size of 192 eligible voters, the percentage of eligible voters who gain coverage under a contract has increased to 37 percent, compared to less than 25 percent in the early 1990s (Bronfenbrenner 2001,2002).

Still, this progress must be put in perspective. At a time when union density in the private sector has dropped below 10 percent and total private sector employment continues to increase by an average of 2.1 million workers each year (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2002), a 9 percent increase in the unit size of elections won is simply not enough. If unions are going to reverse the tide of union density decline, they will need to target units of 5,000, or 10,000 or more; significantly increase the number of organizing campaigns; and dramatically increase the percentage of eligible voters who gain coverage under a union contract.

The overall drop between the percentage of the unit who signed cards before the petition was filed and the percentage of the unit who actually ended up voting for the unit remains quite high (17 percentage points). However, in winning units, where the percentage of card signers averages as high as 71 percent, the percent union vote is only five percentage points lower (66 percent).<sup>10</sup>

### **COMPREHENSIVE ORGANIZING TACTICS**

Table 1.1 also lists the frequencies and win rates associated with the ten comprehensive organizing tactics included in our strategic model. As predicted,